“Tend the rusted steel like a shepherd”: Petropoetics of Oil Work in Canada

by

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Abstract

This dissertation is a literary study of poetry written by oil workers in Canada, which considers poetry alongside and as theorizations about petromodernity, energy transition, and decolonization. The introduction makes a case for the study of petropoetics in the energy humanities. Petropoetics refers to poetry about oil, to any kind of artistic production in the contexts of the Canadian petrostate and the global economy and cultures of oil, and to a broader project of world-making in collaboration with oil and fossil fuels. Following Patricia Yaeger’s claim that it is possible to read for the energy unconscious of any text, the first chapter considers the trails of modernization and wilderness that oil sands engineer S.C. Ells celebrates in *Northland Trails* (1938; 1956), as well as the contradictions between the trails that are repressed and unspoken in Ells’s poetics. The second chapter draws on Michel Pêcheux’s theory of disidentification and José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentificatory performativity to read Peter Christensen’s *Rig Talk* (1981) and Mathew Henderson’s *The Lease* (2012) as disidentifications with the toxic identity reserved for oil workers in the Canadian petrostate. The third chapter considers Dymphny Dronyk’s collection *Contrary Infatuations* (2007) as an affective map and theorization of bad love and reproductive labour in petromodernity. The fourth chapter takes Lesley Battler’s and Naden Parkin’s use of the metaphor of the energy slave in their poetry collections *Endangered Hydrocarbons* (2015) and *A Relationship with Truth* (2014) as critiques and elaborations of Andrew Nikiforuk’s use of the metaphor in *The Energy of Slaves* (2012). In response to the idea that support for the oil industry is support for oil workers, the conclusion asks who we are fighting when we fight climate change and proposes that it is time to rethink solidarity, class politics, decolonization, and the good life in order to make energy transition good for everyone, including oil workers.
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Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... iii
List of Figures .................................................................................................................................. v
Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 1
Timeline of Oil Worker Poetry in Canada ........................................................................................ 35
Chapter 1: Oil Engineer/Poet: The Energy Unconscious of S.C. Ells’s *Northland Trails* .......... 39
Chapter 2: Rig Talk as Disidentification in Peter Christensen’s *Rig Talk* and Mathew Henderson’s *The Lease* .................................................................................................................... 94
Chapter 3: “my love is not dead yet”: Contrary Infatuation, Cruel Optimism, and Impasse ...... 151
Chapter 4: Endangered, Endangering, Enslaved? The Energy Slave in Lesley Battler’s *Endangered Hydrocarbons* and Naden Parkin’s *A Relationship with Truth* ............................. 198
Conclusion: Who Are We Fighting? ............................................................................................... 252
Works Cited ..................................................................................................................................... 272
List of Figures

Figure 1. Sydney Ells at tar sand plant ................................................................. 41
Figure 2. Illustration by S.C. Ells, Northland Trails ........................................ 44
Figure 3. S.C. Ells’s drawing of the Abasand plant in 1942 .............................. 68
Figure 4. S.C. Ells’s drawing of a future Abasand plant ................................. 70
Figure 5. Map of the Athabasca River from Athabasca Landing to Fort McMurray .. 78
Figure 6. Page from “The Athabaska Trail (1913)” by S.C. Ells ..................... 79
Figure 7. Photograph of trackers with officials standing by .............................. 91
Figure 8. “End of the Chain” illustration by Jacqueline Forrie ....................... 106
Figure 9. “In the Distance” illustration by Jacqueline Forrie .......................... 121
Figure 10. Original manuscript page: “The Driller Makes a Mistake” by Peter Christensen ...... 125
Figure 11. “The Driller Makes a Mistake” by Peter Christensen, Rig Talk version .......... 125
Figure 12. “Well Location Map No. 7” ................................................................. 173
Figure 13. Closeup of “Well Location Map No. 7” ............................................ 195
Figure 14. Front cover of Lesley Battler’s Endangered Hydrocarbons ............... 203
Figure 15. Panel from Stuart McMillen’s Energy Slaves .................................. 209
Figure 16. Page from “The Petrochemical Ball” by Lesley Battler ..................... 219
Figure 17. Front cover of A Relationship with Truth by Naden Parkin ............... 230
Introduction

Virden, Manitoba, 11 May 2017
On Tuesday, Warren and I went to Virden to take an oil field tour with the inspector for Manitoba Petroleum. He drove us in his truck to visit the Sinclair field, including pump jacks, batteries, the Enbridge and Tundra (TEML) stations in Cromer, TEML’s rail loading facility, the Westspur line, the Enbridge pipelines crossing the highway (some of them four feet in diameter), and lots of gravel roads and water birds along the way. We alternated between talk about our families and him answering my questions about how hydraulic fracturing works, where it is done, the dangers of H₂S, natural-gas flaring or venting, and the potential for renewable energy here. He kept saying, “Well you’ve really done your homework, little lady.” (Did he really say “little lady,” or am I imagining that part already, only two days later?) But I know only a little about oil pipelines and the oil industry in my province. I know the things I can learn by doing research on the internet, by spending days zooming in on oil wells, pipeline crossings, and facilities on interactive maps, and by reading government, industry, and environmentalist proposals and reports. It’s hard to learn about this. Oil is confounding. We are not supposed to pay attention. We are supposed to turn away. The choice not to look away is a big part of materializing oil in a culture that is already permeated by it.

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“Name another oil worker constructing poems”¹ (Introduction)

When I tell people I am writing a dissertation about poetry written by oil workers, they often respond that they had no idea there was such a thing. Oil worker poetry is surprising because of stereotypes of both oil workers and poetry—stereotypes that the poets I write about in this dissertation work on and against, as in Naden Parkin’s challenge to “Name another oil worker constructing poems” (Relationship 38). In my research and writing process, including visits to centres of oil extraction in my home province and in other parts of Canada, I have faced my own false perceptions about both oil workers and poetry. Oil workers are the people with the most intimate knowledge of the way oil feels, sounds, smells, and perhaps speaks, as well as the ways

¹ Parkin, A Relationship with Truth 38.
in which modern life is fuelled and lubricated by their labour and by oil. I am constantly surprised by the ways oil worker poets use poetry to respond to the difficulty of their work, the vital but sublimated role they play in the Canadian economy and culture, and the effects that oil extraction has on the land. Although I remain an outsider with much to learn about the oil industry and the people who work in it, I begin my planned three-volume study of Canadian petropoetics with this dissertation project: a study of the poetry and poetics of oil work and the oil patch. This is the first book-length study of petropoetics—by which I refer to oil poetry and also, in a broader sense of poetics as world-making, to human entanglement, collaboration, and co-constitution with fossil fuels. In this dissertation, I read poetry written by oil workers in the Canadian oil and gas industry as both petropoetry and ecopoetry, considering the poems themselves as theorizations about class and labour, oil dependency, ecology, gender, race, and decolonization.

Despite Parkin’s sense that he may be the only oil worker poet—a sense shared, paradoxically, by many of the poets I study—in this dissertation I identify a tradition of oil worker poetry that spans the history of oil extraction in Canada, beginning with early poetry by Robert McBride (1869) and S.C. Ells (1938; 1956), then the first full poetry collection about oil work, Peter Christensen’s *Rig Talk* (1981). Oil worker poetry has proliferated in the twenty-first century, with more than ten poetry collections and chapbooks published since 2000. In my four chapters, I offer close readings of six poetry collections from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Ells’s *Northland Trails* (1956), Christensen’s *Rig Talk* (1981), Dymphny Dronyk’s *Contrary Infatuations* (2007), Mathew Henderson’s *The Lease* (2012), Parkin’s *A Relationship with Truth* (2014), and Lesley Battler’s *Endangered Hydrocarbons* (2015). These poetry collections offer insiders’ perspectives on oil work, including the technologies and tools the
workers use, the conditions they work in, the social relations of the oil patch, and the land relations of extractivism. Oil worker poets use their poetry to develop concepts such as “contrary infatuation” and “endangered hydrocarbons” that apply not only to oil work but also to petroculture more generally. The poets are concerned about the impacts that oil extraction, production, and consumption have on the land; they link extractivism with colonialism and suggest that energy transition and decolonization must go together. The poets are also concerned about their interpellation as subjects who are loyal to the industry that pays their bills, who embody the ugliest aspects of extractive colonialism (for example, through the stereotype of the hypermasculine oil worker), or who are more responsible than other Canadians for ecocide and climate change. Sometimes, in their poetry, they respond to such interpellations by identifying with the industry and their prescribed roles within it, and at other times they disidentify through ambivalence, parody, subversion, and critique. In my readings of the poetry collections, disidentification emerges as a site for solidarity between oil workers and other complicit petromodern subjects, a ground for a class politics that envisions an energy transition that is good for the earth and good for workers.

This introduction to my dissertation includes accounts of my methodology and positionality, summaries of my four chapters, and discussions of four key terms: oil worker, work poetry, petropoetics, and land poetics. The timeline on page 35 gives a chronology of the publication of oil worker poetry in Canada, linking it to major events related to the oil industry and climate change. I have interspersed journal entries from my 2017 visits to Virden, Manitoba and Fort McMurray, Alberta throughout this introduction. I visited Virden with my supervisor, Dr. Warren Cariou, while I was doing research for him on pipelines and the oil industry in Manitoba. With Dr. Cariou and Teddy Zegeye-Gebrehiwot, I also travelled to Fort McMurray on
a research trip for Dr. Cariou’s petrography project. I share my journal entries as a reflexive practice of feminist situated knowledge (Haraway, “Situated”). Although I understand myself to be an outsider to oil work, I research and write about oil worker poetry from inside my limited knowledge and experience of oil work and the oil and gas industry, and also from inside the relations of “petromodernity” (LeMenager 67) that connect me to oil extraction and oil workers.

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*Fort McMurray, 22 June 2017*

After driving the Syncrude/Suncor Loop, with stops to photograph the tailings ponds, the smokestacks, and the old bucket-wheel excavator, we came to the Wood Buffalo Viewing Point, a lookout over an area of reclaimed land where we saw the Syncrude buffalo herd grazing. Two workers were unwinding after work, chatting and smoking. I decided to walk over to where they were standing. One of the men approached me and started talking. He had seen us taking photos earlier, and he asked me if we were environmentalists, here to “shit on the oil sands.” As he spoke, he gestured with a hand missing a finger. He seemed angry and defensive, pointing out everything on my body (my glasses, my running shoes . . .) that was made of oil. I didn’t know how to respond, and I wanted to hear what he had to say, so I only nodded and listened. When he realized I wasn’t going to argue back, he told me about how he had worked right here thirty years ago, extracting bitumen from the now-reclaimed site, how the oil companies do right by the land, how tar oozes out of the ground at Abasand, how he is a grandfather and has relatives up in Fort Chipewyan, and how he would bet that I am afraid of a lot of things but he isn’t afraid of anything.

I have been thinking a lot about that conversation—what I should have said, what the oil worker meant, and what was behind his aggression. Why did he feel he had to defend the oil sands? He seemed to think that criticism of the oil industry is an attack on workers like him. Why is that so? He said he was not afraid, but I know oil workers have plenty to fear, including fearing for their own safety, and fearing that they will lose their jobs—if oil prices remain low, if they are replaced by self-driving trucks or other forms of automation, or if Canada commits seriously to its CO₂ emission targets and slows or phases out oil production. Although he told me that the trees clean up the pollution from the oil industry, I wonder whether tar sands workers worry about the air they breathe, the water they drink, or the food they eat. Of course, it’s true that I am afraid of a lot of things, not only climate change, which I think the worker was implying he doesn’t worry about. I know my own complicity and entanglement in petromodernity, yet I do not believe I must be pure or must find a location outside of that all-encompassing system to be critical of it. Mostly, when I think of that encounter, I think about how important it is to find a way to talk about the oil and gas industry in Canada without blaming oil workers or dismissing the threat that energy transition poses to their livelihoods. I

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2 Based on early photography practices, Dr. Cariou has innovated a method and artistic practice of developing photographs using bitumen from the Athabasca tar/oil sands. See [http://www.warrencariou.com/petrography](http://www.warrencariou.com/petrography).
want to hear what oil workers have to say when they do not feel obligated to defend the industry just because they are part of it.

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“the gentle colony / of bitumen worshippers”3 (Methodology and Positionality)

I focus on Canadian poetry in this dissertation because of my location in Canada and my background in Canadian literature. After finding in my early research for a planned dissertation on Canadian poetry about oil that there were several Canadian poetry collections about oil work that had received little or no critical attention to date, I concluded that oil worker poetry in Canada is a significant body of work that warrants attention on its own. Despite being a democracy and a “developed” country, Canada is arguably a petrostate, which Sourayan Mookerjea defines as “a polity that is subordinated and restructured according to the needs of either the Big Oil multinationals or the global political economy of oil or both” (331; see also Cariou, “Tarhands” 17; Nikiforuk, Energy 178-203). Harold Innis argues in The Fur Trade in Canada (1930) that the Canadian nation came together through the geographies and infrastructures of the extraction of raw materials for sale to more industrialized countries like Britain and the United States. Innis’s staples thesis, which was further developed by Mel Watkins (Staples), holds that the Canadian economy has subsequently remained subject to outside imperial powers, with multinational corporations and other nations (especially the United States and Asian industrialized countries) doing the processing and manufacturing that adds value to raw materials extracted in Canada. Considering bitumen as our most recent staple, Gordon Laxer condemns Canada’s failure to diversify or even technologize its economy in preparation for the end of the oil boom. He predicts a coming global economy, transitioned away

3 Battler, Endangered Hydrocarbons 37.
from oil, where Canada’s “fossil fuel belt” will look like the eastern “rust belt” (53; see also Watkins, “Bitumen”; Dobson 65). Canada’s culture of extractivism makes oil workers vulnerable both to the boom-and-bust cycles of the industry and to the energy transition demanded by global warming (see Global Warming: Paris). It is within this unique Canadian context that the oil-worker poetry I study represents oil workers and contemplates energy transition. More work remains to be done on poetry about oil work in other national contexts.

I approach the texts I study as a literary scholar, although my work has affinities with the field of labour studies and with sociological, historical, psychological, anthropological, and geographical studies of oil work. I situate my work within the emergent field of study known as “petrocultures” (After Oil; Wilson et al.), “oil studies” (Barrett and Worden xxx), and the “energy humanities” (Bellamy and Diamanti; Szeman and Boyer; Szeman et al.). Following pathbreaking literary criticism in the energy humanities by scholars such as Patricia Yaeger, Imre Szeman, Warren Cariou, Jennifer Wenzel, Stephanie LeMenager, Graeme Macdonald, and others, I draw on my background in contemporary Canadian literature, ecological and decolonial poetics, and cultural theory to consider what my literary study of poetry written by oil workers can contribute to this field.

I have two main objectives for this dissertation. The first is to identify an already-existing (but as-yet largely unconsidered) tradition of oil worker poetry in Canada. My research builds on Judith Rauscher’s 2014 book chapter “Canadian Petro-Poetics: Masculinity, Labor, and Environment in Mathew Henderson’s The Lease,” where she inaugurates the study of Canadian petropoetics and identifies some of the texts I study here. Although I have noted some individual poems about oil work, I have focused my research and analysis on the more sustained petropoetics of full poetry collections written by oil workers. See the timeline at the end of this
introduction for a working list of Canadian oil worker poetry, including texts that I have not been able to discuss in detail in the chapters of this dissertation. I understand this research to be “a process not just a product” (England 244), and I look forward to adding more oil worker poetry to this list.

My second objective is to analyze representative works of oil worker poetry, making comparisons and linkages between the texts, and addressing broad research questions related to the study of petrocultures. The poetry collections I have selected as primary texts are written by workers directly employed by the oil and gas industry or working directly with oil. My research questions include: What insights does the poetry offer into the experience of oil work, the relations of the oil industry and the oil patch, and the subject position of the oil worker? Are there formal or stylistic similarities or innovations in the texts? How can they be contextualized within Canadian literature and as a tradition of their own? What does the poetry say about class, gender, race, colonialism, and decolonization? Does the poetry offer ideas or resources for energy transition? Are there unexpected innovations or interventions that oil worker poetry offers the energy humanities?

Throughout the dissertation, I use a methodology of reading poetry and cultural theory together, in the understanding that poetry does not need theory or theoretical readings to become political or to theorize. I practice thematic criticism, following Christopher Nealon’s proposal for re-politicizing literary criticism by reading poetry thematically (35) and Joshua Schuster’s assertion that thematic criticism about oil is appropriate because of oil’s “definitive position in modernity” (163). My selection of works includes poetry in many styles and forms: experimentalism, romanticism, lyricism, Language poetry, popular poetry, and hip-hop. This is

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4 This is a methodology I learned from my academic mentors, especially Diana Brydon, Warren Cariou, Jeff Derksen, and Heather Milne (see Cariou, “Edgework”; Derksen; Milne 11-13).
in keeping with my commitment to a new, “more supportive form of pluralism” in poetry and poetics, characterized by Peter Jaeger as crossing differences between poetic schools or movements because “by the early twenty-first century the differences among these categories seem to have been subordinated to an overarching concern with our current ecological, economic, and related social crises” (2). While some of the texts I study are more overtly theoretical or philosophical, many advance theories about petroculture in modes that fit Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s description of “poor theory”—of “unintentional daring and experimentation” (4) that is inherent in such things as “a workman’s clothes,” or body, or artistic production (3)—or Raymond Williams’s description of the thought/feeling of “practical consciousness,” of “what is actually being lived, and not only what it is thought is being lived” (Marxism 130-31). My aim in writing about these poetry collections is to highlight such theorizations, bringing them into conversation with other theory without requiring the poetry to prove or to be faithful to those other theories. In response to critics’ descriptions of some of the poetry I study as “poor” or bad poetry—for example, when they describe Christensen’s performance of oil workers’ “rig talk” as unpoeic (Lane 54; Zacharin 86), as “too close to its sources” (Aubert), or as “acquiescence” to a toxic masculinity (Smith 17)—I echo Ngũgĩ’s celebration of practices of “maximizing the possibilities inherent in the minimum” (2).

As a qualitative researcher and writer in a situation where “the self is the research tool” (Cousin 10), I acknowledge that it is my responsibility, as Glynis Cousin describes, not to be objective but to be “intellectually sharp and emotionally open” (15). I am a white, cisgender woman, a descendant of white settlers and immigrants of mixed European ancestry, living on Treaty One territory and the homeland of the Métis, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where I also grew up. My suburban childhood home was kitty-corner to a hydroelectric station whose constant hum
gave me a physical sense of energy and power structures that are largely invisible in Canadian culture. I have benefitted throughout my life from privileges conferred by whiteness, settler colonialism, heterosexism, ableism, and class. I have also benefitted from my privileged position in the “fossil economy” (Malm 4), as a resident of a petrostate where oil lubricates the workings of government and my access to social services, where energy companies employ my family members, and where my consumption of abundant, cheap energy contributes to climate effects that will affect Northern and island peoples, poor and marginalized people, and future generations more than me.

I am not an oil worker, and I had not even met an oil extraction worker before beginning this project. I know about oil work through visits to Virden, Manitoba and Fort McMurray, Alberta; visits to oil museums in Fort McMurray and Aberdeen, Scotland; and conversations with oil workers I have met through my research; as well as documentary films, online research, books, and episodes of the reality TV shows Licence to Drill and Black Gold. I am an outsider to oil work with much to learn; I acknowledge my shortcomings as a researcher in this regard and attempt to mitigate them through a commitment to epistemic nonviolence, through collaboration and sharing with colleagues in the energy humanities and labour studies, through consultation with worker poets and oil industry insiders, and through a reflexive practice. I approach the study of oil-worker poetry and of petropoetics as a poet and avid reader of poetry, as a feminist, and as an oil consumer deeply concerned about the environmental impacts of the extraction, refining, and combustion of fossil fuels.

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5 Virden, Manitoba is known as the “Oil Capital of Manitoba” and is the site of a Manitoba Petroleum Branch office (“Community History”). The Virden oil field is one of thirteen fields in southwestern Manitoba (Fulton-Regula 7). There were 3,814 producing wells in Manitoba in December 2017 (“Petroleum Statistics”).
Some readers will find it surprising or even suspicious that I argue in this dissertation that the oil worker poets I study are critical of the ecological and social relations of petromodernity and are thinking about energy transition. I contend that oil workers have intimate knowledge of the ecological harm and the physical danger of oil work, and that they understand the relationship between fossil fuel consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, and global warming. In her artist statement for a poetry installation about the Shell Scotford refinery, Edmonton poet Kathy Fisher characterizes refinery workers in this way: “As parents, brothers, sons and daughters, these individuals also read about global warming, climate change, the fate of polar bears. They are us. There is no other, are only layers of complicity, and complexity, in our collective cultural and individual addiction to oil.” Fisher argues that the idea that oil workers do not care about climate change is classist and dangerous. Even as Big Oil and our federal and provincial governments make arguments that it is possible to expand oil and gas extraction while reducing CO₂ emissions in line with Canada’s Paris Agreement targets (“Canada”; Trudeau, “Statement”; “Climate Leadership”; Jaccard), oil workers are, of course, thinking about their future employment in a post-oil economy, as well as the future health and welfare of their families and communities. This involves thinking about transition. Although public debate about transition is in its infancy, is polarizing, and is largely impeded rather than facilitated by our governments and the oil lobby, I contend that oil workers are innovating ways of thinking and speaking about energy transition. Furthermore, many of the oil worker poets I study use poetry as a site of innovation, as a medium for expressing ambivalence and critique, and as a practice of solidarity and alternate world-making.

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Fort McMurray, 22 June 2017
We visited David Brydges at the Noralta Lynx Lodge. We had to get permission and a pass at the gate, and usually only one guest is allowed at a time, but they let all three of us in. We ate a nice supper in the cafeteria. You can eat cod for pretty much any meal in Fort McMurray. David talked a lot—he seems lonely—but it was nice to be near his friendly energy. 

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“Separating the Men from the Girls” (Oil Worker)
My study of oil worker poetry raises questions about who counts as an oil worker. According to Petroleum Labour Market Information (PetroLMI), a Division of Energy Safety Canada, the oil and gas industry (including oil sands) employed 189,500 workers in 2016. This figure includes workers in the sub-sectors of exploration and production, oil and gas services, and pipeline companies (Canada’s Oil and Gas: Distribution 4). Seventy-one percent of oil and gas sector workers are employed in Alberta, 9 percent in British Columbia, 6 percent in Saskatchewan, 9 percent in Central Canada (including Manitoba), and 6 percent in Atlantic Canada (9). Industry workers earned an average salary of $125,300 in 2016 (15). Women made up 22 percent of the workforce; immigrants and non-permanent residents made up 15.8 percent; visible minorities 12.8 percent; and Indigenous peoples 6.3 percent (“Canada’s Oil and Gas: Demographics” 22-23). To account for and emphasize the importance of the oil and gas industry in Canada, the oil lobby adds a broader definition of what might count as oil work to these statistics. According to

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6 David Brydges provided this note when I requested permission to use his name in the introduction: Can I add some social context here, as my story is familiar to the thousands who come to Alberta for work? Originally from Northern Ontario, I travel to Alberta each year for the shutdown season (spring and autumn), working at the Suncor refinery powerhouse. Time spent away can vary from 6 weeks to last year 14 weeks. The work camp is located outside Fort McMurray in the bush. I work fifteen days on, three days off. Being away from family, friends, and your local community is stressful and can be disorienting. For one part of you is a worker spending most of the day with some fellow worker friends but also strangers. The other part is trying to stay in long distance touch with those back home. The camp is only a transient place of necessity until the project is completed.

7 Dronyk, Contrary Infatuations 75.
the Canadian Energy Resource Institute (CERI), “[f]or every direct job created in the Canadian oil and gas sector, 2 indirect and 3 induced jobs in other sectors are created in Canada on average” (Doluweera et al. 4). The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) includes “direct” and “indirect” jobs in its estimate that “Across Canada, the oil & natural gas industry supported in 2017: 533,000 jobs” (“How Many”).

Both in the oil lobby’s use of such figures to garner support for the industry and in petrocultural critique such as Warren Cariou’s description of citizens of the Canadian petrostate as having “tarhands” (“Tarhands”), oil is revealed to pervade work and culture in Canada. There is a sense in which citizens of the petrostate are all oil workers and contemporary poetry is all oil worker poetry. Despite this expansive understanding of who might count as an oil worker poet, I have used narrower parameters to limit my study. While the list of poetry collections in my timeline includes what may be considered direct and indirect oil work (for example, former construction worker Garth Martens and archaeologist Owain Nicholson write about indirect oil work), my analysis in the chapters focuses on poetry written by workers directly employed inside the oil industry. Following the editors of Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry, I do not limit my analysis to either “manual or blue-collar labor” or “the sphere of production” (Atabaki et al. 3). In addition to the poetry of oil rigger Christensen, production tester Henderson, and drilling fluid specialist Parkin, I consider poetry written by two women, Dronyk and Battler, whose work—writing emergency response plans, negotiating surface rights, and managing projects and communication on behalf of oil companies—is farther removed from the materiality of oil but still situated directly within the

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industry. I also include the poetry of S.C. Ells, a civil servant who managed but also participated in the intensely physical labour of tar sands surveying, extraction, separation, and transport in the early twentieth century. Although I have found and included in my timeline some poetry written by workers in refineries (see *Crude Truths* by David Brydges and “They Said Women Always Quit” by Donna Langston [in Tom Wayman’s *Paperwork* anthology]), and one poet, Kelly Shepherd, who has written about pipeline construction work (see *Shift* and *Insomnia Bird*), I hope to find and include poetry by writers who have done a more diverse range of oil jobs in my future research and writing. In keeping with CERI’s “indirect” and “induced” categories of oil work, future studies of oil worker poetry could include poetry by sex workers, gas jockeys, factory workers, truckers, hospitality workers, temporary foreign workers, and more. Any future study of oil worker poetry will have to negotiate both the grey areas and the inequities inherent in defining oil workers.

I regret that the poetry included in this dissertation is not written by a more diverse group of authors. Sadly, my primary texts are reflective of power dynamics and demographics inside the oil and gas industry that privilege men over women or non-binary workers, and white workers over Indigenous workers and other workers of colour. Although oil workers are certainly not all white, these poets are, and most of them are men. In their study of *Indigenous Gendered Experiences of Work in an Oil-Dependent, Rural Alberta Community*, Angele Alook, Ian Hussey, and Nicole Hill use an intersectional analysis to demonstrate that Indigenous people, women, and people of colour face discrimination in the oil industry. They describe the power dynamics of the Alberta oil patch:

> In short, Albertans are living in a corporate-dominated province overly focused on the oil and gas sector, in a settler-colonial country that is built on an intersectional hierarchy of value that sees white, male workers benefit because of the super-exploitation of gendered and racialized people (as well as other intersections of marginalization not
focused on here). That is, in a corporate-capitalist economy like present-day Alberta, even high-wage workers are in some respects exploited, but gendered and racialized people tend to be confined to precarious, marginal positions in which their low wages contribute to especially high profits (9).

Indigenous workers report that often they are hired last and laid off first, are placed in unskilled jobs, and struggle to advance in their careers. Alook and her collaborators note that Indigenous people can mitigate the negative effects of discrimination by starting their own businesses. These findings support Dene political scientist Glen Sean Coulthard’s Indigenous-Marxist argument that when it comes to Indigenous people, Canada is more intent on appropriating their land than their labour: “the history and experience of dispossession, not proletarianization, has been the dominant background structure shaping the character of the historical relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state” (13).

Dronyk’s and Langston’s poetry describe the struggles of being the only woman, or one of only a few women, in a workforce mostly made up of men. So does Lindsay Bird’s new poetry collection, Boom Time. Former Fort McMurray oil worker Kate Beaton’s comic “Ducks” also explores this theme, linking women oil workers and sex workers to the 1,600 ducks who drowned in a Syncrude tailings pond while Beaton was working there in 2008 (see Christian). In the absence of poetry written by Indigenous oil workers (which I still hope to find), I recommend reading oil worker poetry alongside Indigenous poetry. See for example Cree poet Marvin Francis’s work poetry in Bush Camp, where Francis offers, for example, an Indigenous worker’s critique of extractivism:

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he didn’t
get in
get rich
get out
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he was already there
he was poor
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9 Lindsay Bird’s Boom Time was released in spring 2019, as I was revising this dissertation. I look forward to writing more about Bird’s poetry.
and
he loves the muskeg[.] (17)

Responding to the “get in, get rich, get out” mantra of extractive workers doing difficult jobs, Francis critiques the colonial and alienating position that extraction puts workers in and highlights a tension for Indigenous people doing extractive work. The work contradicts, for example, the Cree poetics of “miyo-pimatisiwin (the good life)” (Alook et al. 7): since “he loves the muskeg,” not the money, the worker must negotiate conflicting understandings of wealth and what makes for a good life. The content of my dissertation both reflects the prevalence of white, male workers in the oil industry and fails to represent the diversity that already exists among oil workers. I am on the lookout for more poetry about oil work, especially writing by Indigenous workers, workers of colour, and women.¹⁰

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Fort McMurray, 23 June 2017
We drove to Abasand, one of the first oil sands mines. The walking-tour pamphlet invites visitors to bring “bags and a spoon to scoop your own oil sand.” There’s a hiking trail that the locals treat as a road, driving their ATVs and trucks to the end of the trail at the Horse River and the old mine site. The place where the mine was is a mess of car parts, bullet casings, and other garbage on top of tarry ground that springs, sinks, and sticks underfoot. In some spots you can see the tar melting and running. Teddy filmed Warren digging bitumen to ship home for his petrographs. I walked around to see the coking shills (now covered in impressive graffiti) and the river. A cliff on the other side of the water had tar oozing out of it. It was only supposed to be twenty degrees today, but it was very hot, standing on the tar. And we had to carry quite a bit of equipment. But the hike was beautiful. We were walking through forest that had been burned in the fire. The underbrush was growing in, up to a few feet tall already, with lots of wild rose, raspberries, and flowers. I tasted a wild strawberry, and there were so many butterflies!

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¹⁰ I may need to expand the scope of later studies to include individual poems rather than only full poetry collections written about oil work. An obvious place to start for a future study is searching literary magazines, either nationally or especially those based in the centres of oil extraction and refining.
“I do not forget / my place among things”¹¹ (Work Poetry)

Kootenay School of Writing poet Tom Wayman is the foremost theoretician, anthologist, and advocate of work poetry in Canada. Wayman is critical of the way that Romanticism distanced itself from industrialization and that literature in our consumeristic age has continued to privilege poetry about love, death, and nature over a focus on production and labour (Inside Job 12), which should be “the central concern in our literature, as in life” (32). An outspoken advocate of workplace democracy who points out that most Canadians are “not free at work” (see If You’re Not Free), Wayman considers worker poetry as political, activist poetry (A Country 137). His preferred mode for work poetry is a kind of documentary realism he calls “the new, insider’s, work writing” (“Work and Silence” 79), written not merely about but from inside the experience of work. Adamantly opposed to elitism and incomprehensibility in poetry, Wayman seeks to reclaim terms like innovative, experimental, and radical from the so-called avant-garde (see If You’re Not Free 97-102). Although his insider/outsider categories seem to invite the creation of hierarchies, Wayman resists assigning levels of insider status or authenticity to work poets. Instead, his only comment on when a work writer knows enough to write from inside work is “that personal participation by the poet in the situation described allows the poet to select and portray detail only an insider could know” (Inside Job 21-22). Wayman’s rejection of cut-and-dried delineations of insider and outsider status is appropriate, reflecting, for example, the ways in which there exists no absolute outsider status or perspective on oil work.

In this dissertation, I focus on poetry about work written by oil workers directly employed in the oil industry, adhering to Wayman’s preference for work poetry written from the “inside.”

¹¹ Christensen, Rig Talk 61.
While most of the poets I study write the type of “plain-spoken” poetry that Wayman favours (*If You’re Not Free* 171), and while I appreciate Wayman’s critiques of the irrelevance of some postmodern or Language or “avant-garde” poetry, I believe (as Wayman also concedes [175]) that insider work poetry can engage a variety of modes, genres, and forms. Former Shell project information manager Battler’s poetics of fractionating, splicing, and remixing oil-industry language is an example of an appropriate Language form for insider work poetry written by a worker whose job it is to craft and spin corporate “information.”

As Jacques Rancière demonstrates in *Proletarian Nights*, representations of workers, including Marx’s own representations, are always misrepresentations. If negative stereotypes are one pitfall of studying oil workers, another is the portrayal of oil workers as embodiments of an idealized or universal working class. As an outsider scholar, my focus on insider poetry and popular poetry helps to mitigate but not eliminate problems with representing workers. As Rancière writes, “There is not a popular intelligence concerned with practical things and a scholarly intelligence devoted to abstract thought. It is always the same intelligence at work” (x). In my readings of oil worker poetry as thinking and theorizing for itself, I aim to respect the intelligence and the expression of the poets themselves.

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*Fort McMurray, 24 June 2017*

*We drove up to Bitumount, the other original oil sands mine, where the buildings are still standing. It’s a provincial historic site, but not open to the public. We heard it’s pretty easy to get in, though, so we thought we would try. We climbed under one fence and thought we were in, but then we arrived at a much more official-looking fence with barbed wire on top and decided not to cross.*

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12 There is an endorsement from Tom Wayman on the back cover of *Endangered Hydrocarbons*. Battler’s work-Language poetics is reminiscent of Rachel Zolf’s *Human Resources* (2007), another collection in which the poet manipulates language in a way that mimics her corporate work.
We took the next left turn off Highway 63 to see if we could get to Bitumount by going along the river. We never did find the river along the freshly cut paths we followed, but we realized we must be walking seismic lines, with a site for a well pad at the end of one line. Warren laid tobacco in the big clear-cut square, where we walked over trees that were still lying all over the ground. We found spots along the lines with oozing tar. It was incredibly hot and buggy, and we saw lots of spruce beetles.

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“The tall stacks rise against the skies and factories crowd the land” (Petropoetics)

Beginning with a provocative book review by Amitav Ghosh, literary criticism in the energy humanities has largely focused on the study of fiction. Ghosh first coined the term petrofiction in his 1992 review of Abdelrahman Munif’s Cities of Salt and The Trench. He contemplates why the “Oil Encounter” has not produced a literature like the literature of the spice trade. He calls oil and the relations it has produced “a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic” (“Petrofiction” 29), as well as “barren,” “imaginatively sterile,” mute, stinky, and slippery (30). He cites these characteristics as reasons why the “Great American Oil Novel” has not been written (30)—and “[a]s for an epic poem, the very idea is ludicrous” (29).

Much of the early work in the study of oil and literature has responded to Ghosh’s claims about petrofiction. Graeme Macdonald finds examples of oil novels overlooked by Ghosh and asks, “is not every modern novel to some extent an oil novel?” (“Oil” 7). After Ghosh’s epistemological questions about petrofiction, where he asks why we do not talk, see, or know more about oil, the subsequent petrocultural criticism reveals that the concept of petrofiction slides toward questions about what Imre Szeman calls “our oil ontologies” (“Petrofictions” 3). In “Oil in an American Imaginary,” Peter Hitchcock describes oil as “a cultural logic that dares any

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13 Ells, Northland Trails 70.
writer to express its real, not as some character or passing reference, but as a very mode of referentiality, a texture in the way stories get told” (86). Hitchcock argues that the oil encounter is “a missed encounter” (90), and the larger petrofiction is the illusion that American life, like American wars in the Middle East, is ever about anything but oil. In response to the paradoxical absence and ubiquity of petrofictions, it becomes important to tell stories about oil, to seek out such stories, and to find them hidden in the most obvious and unexpected cultural and social locations. For example, Jennifer Wenzel considers the postcolonial literary texts she describes as “petro-magic-realism” (as in Ben Okri’s short story “What the Tapster Saw” and Ogaga Ifowodo’s poetry collection *The Oil Lamp*) as fantastic narratives that use (magic) realism to puncture the illusions of petro-magic, including the myth of the resource curse (see “Petro-Magic-Realism” and “Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited”). Much attention has been given, furthermore, to the function of speculative fiction to imagine energy transition and worlds “after oil” (*After Oil*; see for example Graeme Macdonald, “Improbability”). Because such theories and practices of petrofiction have been so central to the study of petrocultures thus far, *petrofiction* has become an all-encompassing term for oil in literature, as in the special section of *American Book Reviews* on “Petrofictions” edited by Szeman in 2012, whose scope was not in fact limited to fiction (although it included no poetry).

Despite this focus on fiction, literary criticism (or petrocriticism) in the energy humanities is also concerned with a range of genres other than fiction. Patricia Yaeger argues for the periodization of literature by dominant energy sources and also that it is possible to read for the “energy unconscious” of any text (309). Stephanie LeMenager writes, “compelling oil media are everywhere. Films, books, cars, foods, museums, even towns are oil media. The world itself writes oil, you and I write it. Petrofiction provides one route to understanding our entanglement.
So does everything else. As a critical essayist, my challenge has been to find a point of view from which to frame the everything of oil” (11). LeMenager includes readings of poems (see 25-26, 60-65, 123) and pays attention to an infrastructural and cultural poetics of oil in Living Oil. Ghosh himself remarks in his recent book The Great Derangement, a book still very focused on the potential of fiction, that “[p]oetry . . . has long had an intimate relationship with climactic events” (26). He speculates that interactions between humans and nonhumans, which must be accounted for to think through oil dependency, climate change, and decolonization, might happen best in images rather than words (83). Although Ghosh does not pursue it himself, these comments seem to recommend a Petrocriticism that includes the study of Petropoetics. Largely neglected in the early years of Petrocriticism (see Rauscher 101; Little et al. 12), the development of theories and practices for studying Petropoetry is emergent today (see Aghoghovwia; Campbell; Dickinson; Egya; Kalinin; Rauscher; Schuster; Sloane, “Energizing”). Although scholars have been using the term Petropoetics or Petro-poetics since Judith Rauscher, Ilya Kalinin, Katie Holt, and Marina Zurkow each used it separately in 2014,14 there has been no conversation about Petropoetics to parallel the discussion of Petrofiction.15 While some concepts

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14 See Rauscher; and the reference to a paper presented by Ilya Kalinin and Katie Holt in Balloni 325. Punctum Books uses the term petro-poetics to describe the picture-book version of Marina Zurkow’s project The Petroleum Manga (see “The Petroleum Manga”).

15 According to a 2018 report to the Royal Society of Edinburgh Research Network in the Arts and Humanities, in the energy humanities, poetry is thus far “less attended to despite the prolific amount of poets and poetic work carried out in eco-literary circles,” where “examples of ‘petro-poetry’ [are] accumulating, though . . . still pretty dispersed and under the radar” (Little et al. 12). Whereas a Literature Online database search for “petrofiction” yields 29 results, “petropoetics” yields 1, and “petro-poetry” 0. Google Scholar results represent a similar disparity (221, 18, and 5, respectively). My searches across six databases yielded large numbers for “oil” and “poetry” together (ranging from 91 [MLA] to 33,349 [JSTOR] and 484,000 [Google Scholar]) or “oil” and “poetics” (17; 6,014; and 49,500 respectively), but “oil poetry” yielded 0 results in the Literature Online, MLA, Project MUSE, and Academic Search Complete databases, 7 in JSTOR, and 29 in Google Scholar, and “oil poems” yielded 2 results in Google Scholar and 0 in the other databases (search results are from 21 February 2019). These imperfect measures of existing scholarship demonstrate that little Petrocriticism to date has focused on poetry, while simultaneously showing that literary critics have written about poetry related to oil for decades.
and forms of analysis, such as the energy unconscious, can be easily adapted to study petropoetics, a new focus on petropoetics will require terminology and concepts of its own.

Whereas the study of *petrofiction* is concerned with the stories we tell about oil, the study of *petropoetics* is concerned with poetry and the writing of poetry, and also, more broadly, creation, world-making, and ways of life. This is in keeping with the meaning of *poesis* as not only a poem or poetry but also “the process of making; production, creation; creativity; culture” (“poesis, n”). Percy Bysshe Shelley writes in his “Defence of Poetry” (1821) that poets are “not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers” (31). Shelley encourages a broad definition of poetics and the work of the poet. Petropoets are those who write poetry about oil, who make any kind of art about oil, or who shape the world in oil’s image: this includes poets, artists, corporations, governments, producers, consumers, and a wide range of non-human agents including the oil itself, the ancient plants it is made of, the sand or rock that holds it, the fluids used to steam and fracture the oil out of the earth, the machines that extract, refine, and transport it, and so on.

Contemporary feminist scientist and theorist Donna Haraway calls our co-constitution with the worlds we live in “Sympoiesis—making with” (*Staying 5*). Haraway argues that humans exist not as the individualized poets and world-makers emphasized by a concept like the Anthropocene but always in sympoietic collaboration with other makers, including non-human ones. In Dronyk’s poem “Perforating,” human relationships with hydrocarbons not only serve human aims but also “rock us” (88). The process I refer to as *petropoetics* is world-making through collaboration and co-constitution between humans and fossil fuels. It is also art-making that participates in, describes, contemplates, or critiques this poetics.
Like *petrofiction*, *petropoetics* is an onto-epistemological concept (Barad 185).

Petropoetics is explicitly materialist, concerned with the material-discursive iterations of world-making that bind us with oil. This includes not only the material relations of “fossil capital” (Malm) but also the human/non-human relations described by feminist new materialists as “entanglement” (Barad; Tsing, *Mushroom* vii), “staying with the trouble” (Haraway), “transcorporeality” (Alaimo 2), and “viscous porosity” (Tuana), relations of reciprocity that have been understood and theorized by Indigenous peoples long before these “new” theorizations (see Todd). Petropoetics is a practice of “knowing in being” (Barad 185). For example, in my readings of oil worker poetry, it highlights knowledge that workers embody and inhabit, including the knowledge that nature in Canada is not empty, infinite, inert, or pristine, and that natural resources, like the human resources the workers represent, are only ever extracted through compromise, loss, and harm. As Battler demonstrates in *Endangered Hydrocarbons*, doing the work of world-making in collaboration with hydrocarbons reveals both the agency of the hydrocarbons and human “response-ability” (Haraway, *Staying* 78) for and to fossil fuels. In this sense, petropoetics, like petrofiction, can be speculative, both imagining and constituting worlds other than our oil-infused petromodernity.

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**Fort McKay First Nation, 24 June 2017**
Sweaty, hungry, and covered in bug spray, with tar stuck to our shoes, we showed up at Fort McKay First Nation for Treaty Days. There was a free supper in the community hall. We were so hungry, and the food tasted delicious. We caught the end of a performance by the Black Eyed Cree. And then we stayed for a pow wow—first an opening procession and prayer, then dancing, drumming, and singing.

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“with no sense of what is yours, and what is not”16 (Land Poetics)

Métis literary scholar Warren Cariou has summarized traditional Indigenous teachings about energy by saying, “Energy is a name for the relationship we have with the land” (“Transition”). My thinking about petropoetics hinges on the idea that petropoetics, like ecopoetics and Indigenous poetics, is a land poetics and politics.

As a world-making project and land poetics, petropoetics can be described as an extractive relationship with the land based in fossil-fuel extraction, production, and consumption. It is a process of increasing human entanglement with fossil fuels that, as Petrocultures scholars have shown, is linked to the projects of colonialism (Mookerjea; Yusoff, Billion), capitalism (Malm), modernity (LeMenager), patriarchy (Turcotte; Wilson, “Gendering”), democracy (Mitchell), and the nation (Bob Johnson, Carbon; Huber, Lifeblood). In A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None, geographer Kathryn Yusoff shows that practices of extraction depend on a colonial separation between humans and inhumans that defines the properties of a seemingly inert natural world as extractible. In this sense, petropoetics is an alienating land poetics and politics.17 Yet, as Yusoff argues in “Geologic Life,” because nature and fossil fuels are not actually inert, petropoetics is also a “collaborative project” with fossil fuels (781), one that has benefitted, harmed, and shaped our species, as well as having impacts on the earth and atmosphere.

Related to this sense of petropoetic world-making, petropoetics as artistic and poetic practice is also a land poetics: it explores, enacts, critiques, or resists human entanglement with fossil fuels. It can also be a speculative poetics that looks for better ways of relating to fossil

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16 Henderson, The Lease 8.
17 In “Ideas of Nature,” Raymond Williams describes an “alienation of nature” that results from the false “separation of nature from human activity” (82). Jonathan Bate argues that the very notion of and word for the environment is a product of a modern sense of alienation (13). Robin Wall Kimmerer discusses human alienation from nature in terms of “species loneliness”: she describes “a deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship” (208-209).
fuels and the land. Each of the poetry collections that I read in this dissertation is petropoetry, ranging from Ells’s optimism (and repressed doubts) about petromodern living to Dronyk’s characterization of her speaker’s entanglement with oil as bad love, and to Battler’s demonstration that the oil industry pervades and colonizes every corner of contemporary life. Yet, each of the collections is also ecopoetry, expressing love and concern for the land and reaching toward more reciprocal ways of living on it. For example, Parkin’s book title, *A Relationship with Truth: Poem and Verse Born in the Canadian Oil Patch*, describes the poetry (and by extension the poet) as native to the oil patch. Parkin’s persona wishes for a better way to dwell in the place he calls home, but he does not know how to relate to the land in a way that does not define it as a site of extraction.

In *The Song of the Earth*, a theory of (lyric) ecopoetics, Jonathan Bate characterizes ecopoetry as being concerned with dwelling on or with the land. He writes, “Ecopoetics asks in what respects a poem may be a making (Greek *poiesis*) of the dwelling-place—the prefix eco- is derived from the Greek *oikos*, ‘the home or place of dwelling’” (75). For Bate, ecopoetics involves both “an echoing of the song of the earth itself” (76) and experimentation in good ways of living with the earth. He describes ecopoems as “imaginary parks in which we may breathe an air that is not toxic and accommodate ourselves to a mode of dwelling that is not alienated” (64). Bate is careful to separate ecopoetics from ecopolitics, arguing that ecopoetry is “pre-political” (266). Other ecocritics disagree with this separation, however. Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street include nature poetry, activist and political poetics, and postmodern, poststructuralist “ecological poetry” in their own definition (xxix). They summarize, “Ecopoetry enacts through language the manifold relationship between the human and the other-than-human world” (xxx). Jonathan Skinner also characterizes ecopoetics as a practice of dwelling in his expansive
definition that accommodates not only poetry in a variety of modes, including Language and conceptual poetry, but also ecopoetics as “an array of practices” not limited to poetry: “Rather than locate a ‘kind’ of writing as ‘ecopoetic,’ it may be more helpful to think of ecopoetics as a form of site-specificity,” where the site is “the oikos, the planet earth that is the only home our species currently knows” (“What Is Ecopoetics?”). As Skinner shows, ecopoetics need not only involve imaginary experiments in dwelling: it can also be “poetry that confronts disasters and environmental injustices,” such as Christensen’s poetry that is deeply troubled by the environmental and social impacts of oil extraction. It can be “poetic experimentation [that] complements scientific methods in extending a more reciprocal relation to alterity” (Skinner), including Battler’s experimentation with the methods of hydrocarbon extraction and refining.

The dilemma that Parkin faces when he grounds his critical ecopoetics in the oil patch is the dilemma of settler-colonial Canadian ecopoetics: coloniality gets in the way of living well on the land. In their argument that the start date for the Anthropocene should be calibrated to the colonization of the Americas, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd describe settler colonialism as a rejection of reciprocal, Indigenous land relations:

Universalist ideas and ideals are embedded in the colonial project as it was enacted through a brutal system of imposing “the right” way of living. In actively shaping the territories where colonizers invaded, they refused to see what was in front of them; instead forcing a landscape, climate, flora, and fauna into an idealized version of the world modelled on sameness and replication of the homeland. (769)

In other words, settler modes of dwelling are alienating, based in misrecognition of what the land is and how to live on it. In Literary Land Claims, Margery Fee problematizes the “settler-nationalist” project of using literature to build a nation and a home on stolen land (9). She contrasts the “Romantic nationalism” traced through Canadian literature by Northrop Frye and
Margaret Atwood with a concurrent, resistant Indigenous literary tradition (5). In keeping with Frye’s description of “Where is here?” as the perplexing riddle of Canadian identity (Frye 222), the failures of settler Canadians to understand where they really are and what it means to occupy territory here has resulted in colonial violence and illegitimate land claims. A reciprocal land poetics of dwelling must be not only an ecopoetics but also a decolonial poetics.

As Cree scholar Neal McLeod describes in his introduction to Indigenous Poetics in Canada, Indigenous poetics makes little distinction between poetry, storytelling, theory, and politics. Okanagan scholar and poet Jeannette Armstrong theorizes Indigenous languages and poetics as mediums for “land speaking”: “The language spoken by the land, which is interpreted by the Okanagan into words, carries parts of its ongoing reality. The land as language surrounds us completely, just like the physical reality of it surrounds us. Within that vast speaking, both externally and internally, we as human beings are an inextricable part—though a minute part—of the land language” (178). Alyce Johnson describes Indigenous poetics, from her Southern Tutchone perspective, as “landscape pedagogy” (146). Similarly, Anishinaabe scholar Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair writes, “Indigenous poets give us words that not only describe the world but embody the tools necessary for us to live in it” (209). He describes Indigenous poetics as a way of learning and knowing how to live in a place. Expressed in poetry, storytelling, art, and more broadly as ways of living in particular places, Indigenous poetics enacts reciprocal and respectful land relations that may offer ways out of the dead ends of settler colonialism and climate change. The work of contemporary Indigenous poets and theorists—which Coulthard argues turns away from a colonial “politics of recognition” to focus instead on Indigenous resurgence and sovereignty (106)—is not on offer, however, as another resource to be extracted to serve colonial power relations or the nation-state.
Each of the oil worker poetry collections that I study in this dissertation includes a sense—either conscious or unconscious—that Indigenous people and Indigenous knowledge are key to dwelling on the land. For example, In Dronyk’s poem “Interest-Based Negotiation,” a settler landowner gives a “Calgary land man” an arrowhead she found on her land, an object that undermines the legitimacy of the negotiation the pair are engaged in and points to the dispossession of the rightful owners and caretakers of the land (83-84). Christensen’s poetry mourns the disparities between an Indigenous poetics and the petropoetics he observes in Alberta. None of the oil worker poets arrives at a land poetics of dwelling and reciprocity, but they each have a sense that such a poetics is possible because of the intimacy with the land that oil work fosters. Robin Wall Kimmerer quotes Mohawk elder Henry Lickers describing an unexpected land pedagogy that comes with the extractive work of settler colonialism: “You know, they came here thinking they’d get rich by working on the land. So they dug their mines and cut down the trees. But the land is the one with the power—while they were working on the land, the land was working on them. Teaching them” (213). This is how a practice of petropoetics can bend toward a decolonial land poetics. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue, decolonization must involve not only symbolic decolonization or the conscientization of the settler but also the settler’s relinquishing of stolen land and the redefinition of what it means to have immigrated to sovereign Indigenous territory with pre-existing laws and land relations.

Kimmerer is a Potawatomi botanist and writer whose book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* is an argument, based on the example of human relationships with sweetgrass, that it is possible for humans to do good rather than only harm to the land. Kimmerer proposes for all people, including settlers, a land poetics of “becoming indigenous to a place” (9; 205). Not “an open invitation to take what little
is left” (211) nor to appropriate Indigenous rituals and ways of living on the land, Kimmerer’s proposal is instead for the imagination and creation of new rituals that will help to move us out of extractive and colonial mindsets and into reciprocal, responsible relationship with the land. Kimmerer asks, “What happens when we truly become native to a place, when we finally make a home?” (207). I read her chapter “The Sacred and the Superfund”—about Onondaga Lake, the site where the Haudenosaunee Confederacy was born, which is now essentially a tailings pond—as an example of learning how to become indigenous to a place. Kimmerer describes the slow work of botanists, Indigenous people, and other volunteer caregivers to reintroduce native species to chemical waste, to soil so toxic that it is white. She imagines a tour of the lake that moves participants through relations with the land as capital, property, machine, teacher and healer, responsibility, sacred, community, and finally home (329-40), a movement from alienation toward grounded reciprocity. Kimmerer justifies the choice of optimism even in such dire circumstances, articulating what I consider to be a poetics of restoration:

But it is not enough to weep for our lost landscapes; we have to put our hands in the earth to make ourselves whole again. Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift. (327)

Restoration is “restoring a relationship of respect, responsibility, and reciprocity. And love.” (Kimmerer 336). With love for the land arising as a common theme among the oil worker poetry I study, I recognize that the poets I study share a desire for a better, reciprocal land politics. Restoration of the kind described by Kimmerer is also important for Canadians, as we reckon with the crisis of inactive and abandoned oil wells and face seriously the reclamation of the tailings ponds and open-pit mines in the tar sands (see Anderson; Lothian; Riley, “Redwater”; Riley, “Regulator”). Like the case of Onondaga Lake, these are instances where it is important
for citizens to call for corporate accountability in addition to practicing restoration. The process of decolonization, naturalization, and restoration that Kimmerer sketches is a slow one with many potential pitfalls and ethical dilemmas, yet I see this, ultimately, as an appropriate version of speculative poetics to set in opposition and resistance to, and transformation of, petropoetics. A land poetics of decolonization and becoming indigenous to place is perhaps an answer to the sense of alienation, complicity, and contrary infatuation that is shared by the oil worker poets and other petromodern subjects implicated in the relations of fossil capital and settler colonialism.

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Fort McMurray, 25 June 2017
At Nexen’s Long Lake we could hardly see anything. Same with a SAGD project near Kinosis. We saw an empty Black Diamond camp. It seemed like we wouldn’t be able to find any of the SAGD projects that we had seen on Google Maps. Then we saw some huge tanks at Cheecham Terminal (Enbridge), a fox, some marked Enbridge pipeline routes, and three above-ground pipelines that crossed under the highway. I touched a pipeline! (hot) and listened to it (quiet). It’s weird to get so excited about something I wish didn’t exist.

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“Well it’s about gawdam time / somebody wrote about us”18 (Chapter Summaries)
My first chapter, “‘Wearily wings the grey goose south’: The Energy Unconscious of S.C. Ells’s Northland Trails,” considers the energy unconscious of poetry about nature and industrialization in the Athabasca region, written by an oil sands innovator who left his oil work out of his art. Ells, the “father” of the tar sands (“Father”),19 investigated the deposits near Fort McMurray on

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18 Christensen, Rig Talk 7.
19 The choice between the terms oil sands and tar sands to describe the resource that is being extracted in the Athabasca region has become polarizing. Ells himself preferred bituminous sands, a term that Jon Gordon also uses to avoid taking a position either for the industry (oil sands) or against it (tar sands). Barry Ferguson uses the terms interchangeably (see Ferguson 5-6). I have chosen to alternate between the two terms in this dissertation, to signal
behalf of the federal Department of Mines beginning in 1913. In his self-illustrated literary collection *Northland Trails* (1938; 1956), Ells celebrates the fur-trade ways of life and the seemingly pristine northland that he could still enjoy in the early twentieth century, before the large-scale industrialization of the oil sands—that is, before the fruition of the modernizing project and energy transition that he “pioneered” (“Pioneer”). Equally likely to envision a fully colonized and industrialized north and to mourn the loss of pre-modern modes of production and transportation, Ells treats “modernity and wilderness” (Jon Gordon 56) as “northland trails” that he can keep separate. I consider the poem “The Athabaska Trail (1913)” as a telling moment when the two trails intersect and reveal the unspeakable energy unconscious of *Northland Trails*: the knowledge that Ells was an agent, and not a victim, of the modernization of the northland he loved. I argue that colonial petromodernity is based in contradictory aesthetics of modernization (through extraction) and of the preservation of a seemingly untouched natural world. It is only possible to hold these contrary aesthetics together by repressing the tension between them, by taking flight from intimacy with the land, and by undermining Indigenous sovereignty and ways of life.

My second chapter, “Rig Talk as Disidentification in Peter Christensen’s *Rig Talk* and Mathew Henderson’s *The Lease,*” brings together two collections of lyric poetry (published in 1981 and 2012, respectively) that have each been considered as the first poetry book about oil work in Canada. Drawing on Michel Pêcheux’s theory of disidentification and José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentificatory performativity, I consider Christensen’s and Henderson’s performances of “rig talk”—the talk of oil workers—as disidentifications with the social and cultural positions of the poet and the hypermasculine oil worker. Rig talk makes these oil worker
poets “quease and pull away” (Henderson, Lease 64), but it also makes them “rough” like the other workers (Christensen, Rig 67). Rather than pitting themselves against other oil workers by “[turning] them over in the end” through parody or critique (Henderson 67), Christensen and Henderson use disidentificatory performance to make their interpellation by petromodern ideology work “against itself” (Pêcheux 195). Their similar but distinct positions—during different oil booms, and at different stages of neoliberal hegemony—lead them to adopt different strategies for deflecting, accepting, and refusing the oil worker’s seeming responsibility for environmental harm. When the rigs themselves speak, breaking through the poets’ performances of human rig talk, different scales of responsibility, ethics, and justice come into view. I consider petrocultural disidentification as a mode for solidarity across difference and a decolonial class politics.

In “‘My love is not dead yet’: Contrary Infatuation, Cruel Optimism, and Impasse,” my third chapter, I consider Dymphny Dronyk’s 2007 poetry collection Contrary Infatuations as a theorization of a structure of feeling of petromodernity. Similar to Lauren Berlant’s “cruel optimism,” Dronyk’s “contrary infatuation” is a feeling of bad love that is exemplified by her speaker’s decision to stay in a relationship with an abusive man because he is dying. Although oil work is seemingly the subject of only the closing section of the book, I read the metaphorical and theoretical work of the entire collection in relation to oil work and petromodernity. Through sequences of work poetry focused on gendered, reproductive labour performed as a cook for tree planters, as a lover and wife of a man deployed during the Gulf War, as a mother, and as “The Only Girl at the Rig” (77)—that is, as a mediator doing community relations work and acquiring surface rights for the oil industry—Dronyk assembles images and metaphors for the impasse of petromodern living, in which we know we need to break up with fossil fuels but we do not know
how. I argue that contrary infatuation is a form of petrocultural disidentification that allows us to account for our relationships with oil. It proposes responses to impasse that factor in love, desire, and the debts we feel we owe to fossil fuels.

My final chapter, “Endangered, Endangering, Enslaved? The Energy Slave in Lesley Battler’s *Endangered Hydrocarbons* and Naden Parkin’s *A Relationship with Truth,*” considers the use of the metaphor of the energy slave in two recent and unconventional poetry collections. In *Endangered Hydrocarbons* (2015), former Shell project information manager Lesley Battler splices and fractionates language in a process that mirrors both the refining of hydrocarbons and the petrochemical industry’s production of “information” through appropriation, spin, and corporate speak. Battler’s “seriously playful” Language poetry (Sloane, “Endangered” 2) mimics and critiques Andrew Nikiforuk’s characterization of hydrocarbons as “inanimate slaves” (*Energy* 90). Drilling fluid specialist Naden Parkin’s self-published book *A Relationship with Truth: Poem and Verse Born in the Canadian Oil Patch* (2014) is a collection of earnest, rhyming poems that describe the position and the emotions of an oil extraction worker who feels trapped inside his oil work. In his intuitive, personal, hip-hop inflected poetics, Parkin represents oil workers as energy slaves. His poetry exposes the contrary infatuations of an oil worker, where he is always “blessed” and “cursed” (11)—endangered and endangering—in the relations of oil work, toxic masculinity, working-class identity, and settler colonialism. In my reading of the energy unconscious of *A Relationship with Truth,* Parkin’s appropriation of the dispossession and dehumanization of Black and Indigenous peoples to describe his own pain and exploitation calls for a decolonial class politics for energy transition. While exploring linkages between the extractive logics of energy and slavery is an important task for petrocultures, I question the use of the metaphor of the energy slave to make those links. Because it implicitly adopts enslaving
logic that categorizes enslaved people and hydrocarbons as inhuman and inanimate, it is prone to appropriate, forget, repeat, or make light of the “unfinished business” of slavery (Soyinka).

I conclude the dissertation with a brief discussion of what a decolonial class politics and energy transition in solidarity with oil workers might look like. I ask, who we are fighting when we fight the fossil economy and climate change?

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Fort McMurray, 26 June 2017

I watched out the airplane window as we began to fly along Highway 63, south toward Edmonton. I think I saw the Hangingstone SAGD project (Athabasca Oil), and further along another one—not sure which one. The network of seismic lines and well pads in the forest is very visible from the air. We also flew over some above-ground pipelines, maybe the same ones we visited along Highway 881 yesterday, with a wide swath of forest cleared around them. Looking down on this surreal landscape, which looks both so wild and so segmented and technologized, I was thinking of my looking as trying to read the landscape—to see what it used to look like, who lives there, what’s been done to it, where we are. And I was thinking of how much time I have spent trying to do this reading, especially by looking at maps. What is the use of my nonexpert, or perhaps literary or creative reading? What can I have to say about it?

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“all the time there is a single / climate”20 (Conclusion)

This introduction serves both to introduce my study of poetry written by oil workers in Canada and to propose a wider-ranging study of petropoetics that includes poetry about oil as well as the human project of world-making with fossil fuels. Petropoetics as a land poetics and mode of dwelling with the earth is a project that we are all involved in. Poetry that engages with this broader sense of petropoetics can help us to account for our entanglements and contrary infatuations with oil, as well as to imagine other, more ethical and responsible modes of dwelling. As both oil workers and poets, the writers whose poetry collections I study in this

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20 Battler, Endangered Hydrocarbons 159.
dissertation straddle the two senses of petropoetics, as art-making and as world-making. Most oil worker poets have intimate knowledge of petropoetics as land poetics, of the material and cultural power of fossil fuels, and of the ways in which a just energy transition requires a reckoning and reframing of human relationships with and responsibilities to the earth, Indigenous peoples, workers, and nonhumans (including hydrocarbons). Oil worker poetry has much to contribute to Canadian literature, the environmental and energy humanities, and energy transition in Canada.
Timeline of Oil Worker Poetry in Canada

1858—First oil well in North America in Oil Springs, Ontario (one year before the Drake well in Pennsylvania); discoveries of oil and gas in Ontario, Alberta, and the Northwest Territories follow.


1913—S.C. Ells investigates the tar sands on behalf of the federal government and ships bitumen south by scow along the Athabasca River.

1930—Mineral rights in western provinces are transferred from the federal government to the provinces.

1938—*Northland Trails* by S.C. Ells, 1st ed. (Garden City Press)
Discussed in chapter 1

1947—Imperial Oil drills Leduc #1 in Leduc, Alberta, known as the birthplace of the modern oil industry in Canada.

1951—Discovery of the Daly field in Manitoba

1956—*Northland Trails* by S.C. Ells, New and Enlarged Edition (Burns & MacEachern)
Discussed in chapter 1

1960—Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) founded

1967—Opening of the Great Canadian Oil Sands

1973—OPEC oil embargo and oil shock

1977—Exxon climate scientists first link climate change to fossil fuel consumption.

1980—Pierre Trudeau’s Liberal government introduces the National Energy Program (NEP).

1981—*Rig Talk* by Peter Christensen (Thistledown)
Discussed in chapter 2

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21 Sources for oil industry events in timeline: “Canada-Kyoto”; Coglon; Eaton, “1980s”; Ellwanger et al.; Horn; “How We’re Putting a Price”; “May 2016”; Russum; Tippett; “UNFCCC”; Valiante.
1981—*Going for Coffee: Poetry on the Job*, edited by Tom Wayman (Harbour, 1981). Includes works by three oil worker poets: four early versions of *Rig Talk* poems by Christensen (54-56; 58), “Tripping” by Deena Hunter (56-57), and “Blind Rivers of No Sun” by R.A. Kawalilak (59). Kawalilak’s bio indicates that he was working on a poetry collection about “sweat spent in the oil and gas fields around Rainbow Lake in northwestern Alberta” (203), but I have found no indication that the book was ever published.

1982—Oil glut causes prices to fall

1982—Ocean Ranger drilling rig sinks off the coast of Newfoundland, killing 84 people

1984—Brian Mulroney’s Progressive Conservatives defeat the Liberals and scrap the NEP.

1986—Oil bust: prices collapse

1988—Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change established

1990-91—Gulf War

1991—*Paperwork: Contemporary Poems from the Job*, edited by Tom Wayman (Harbour). Includes “They Said Women Always Quit” by former refinery worker Donna Langston (81-82)

1992—Rio Earth Summit

1990s—Escalating eco-terrorist sabotage of sour gas wells in the Peace Country, attributed to Wiebo Ludewig and the Trickle Creek community

1998—Canada signs the Kyoto Protocol, committing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

2006—Stephen Harper’s Progressive Conservatives win a minority government on a platform that includes scrapping Canada’s Kyoto targets

2006—Oil prices reach record high

2007—*Contrary Infatuations* by Dymphny Dronyk (Thistledown)

   Discussed in chapter 3


2010—*Deepwater Vee* by Melanie Siebert (McClelland & Stewart). Siebert’s poetry is based on her experience working as a wilderness guide on northern rivers, including the Athabasca and the North Saskatchewan. Includes poems written to/about Sir Alexander Mackenzie, the eighteenth-century Scottish explorer after whom the Mackenzie River is named, who noted the presence of bitumen in the Athabasca region.

2011—Canada withdraws from the Kyoto Protocol.

2012—*The Lease* by Mathew Henderson (Coach House)

   Discussed in chapter 2
2013—*Crude Truths* by David C. Brydges (*Brydge Builder Press*). Chapbook. Brydges is a construction worker and member of the Construction & General Workers Union Local 92. Brydges lives in Northern Ontario and travels to Fort McMurray for the shutdown season (spring and fall) at the Suncor refinery powerhouse. He is also a cultural entrepreneur and poetry community organizer.

2013—An oil-by-rail explosion kills 47 people in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec.

2014—*A Relationship with Truth: Poem and Verse Born in the Canadian Oil Patch* by Naden Parkin (self-published)

Discussed in chapter 4

2014—*Prologue for the Age of Consequence* by Garth Martens (*Anansi*). Insider work poetry about residential construction work in the Alberta oil patch

2014—*Prairie Wheel: A Vision of Turnaround* by Kathy Fisher (self-published). Chapbook. Oil refinery/oil work poetry written by an outsider/visitor to the refinery. Fisher, an Edmonton poet and artist, was one of ten artists commissioned to visit the Shell Scotford refinery during turnaround in 2013 and produce artworks.

2014—After prices averaging $110 US per barrel since 2011, oil prices collapse, falling to less than half that value, triggering layoffs, automation, and other cost-reduction strategies in the industry.

2015—*Endangered Hydrocarbons* by Lesley Battler (*BookThug*)

Discussed in chapter 4

2015—Justin Trudeau’s Liberals win a majority government on a platform that includes a commitment to “A Clean Environment and a Strong Economy” (*Real Change* 39).

2015—Canada signs the Paris Agreement to limit global warming to 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels.

2016—*Digsite* by Owain Nicholson (*Nightwood*). Insider poetry about doing archaeology work for the mining and oil industries


2016—Oil prices reach a low point of $29 US per barrel and begin a slow recovery.

2016—The wildfire known as “the Beast” rages through Fort McMurray. During the evacuation of 88,000 people, two die in a car crash. The fire destroys 1,958 structures, 1,935 of them residential ("May 2016" 14).

2016—The Trudeau government announces a federal benchmark for carbon taxes and invites the provinces and territories to develop their own carbon tax plans by September 2018.

2017—*The Oil Patch (Cowboy Poems Four)* by Ron Gale (self-published). A chapbook-length collection of insider “cowboy” poetry about oil work, written, according to the
dedication, between the 1940s and the 2000s. Gale lives in Alberta, but he has also worked in offshore oil (Ellesmere Island).

2018—*Tar Swan* by David Martin (*NeWest*). This is poetry about oil work, written by an outsider/researcher, based on research on Robert C. Fitzsimmons, an early oil sands developer.

2018—*Insomnia Bird* by Kelly Shepherd (*Thistledown*). Poems mostly about living and working in Edmonton. These are not narrative poems—but instead collages of found text, lyric lines, and Alberta vernacular—so the references to the oil industry, oil work, and work in Fort McMurray are dispersed throughout. See especially “#ALBERTASTRONG” (76-78) and “Birds Migrate at Night, Mostly Unseen” (95).

2018—With other proposed pipelines cancelled or delayed, the Trudeau government purchases the Trans Mountain pipeline from Kinder Morgan to guarantee that a proposed expansion will be built.

2019—The Trudeau government oversees the implementation of a federal carbon tax in provinces whose governments did not develop their own carbon tax plans (Saskatchewan, Ontario, Manitoba, and New Brunswick).

2019—*Boom Time* by Lindsay Bird (*Gaspereau*). Bird lived and worked in work camps near Fort McMurray during the boom around 2006. Her lyric, imagistic poetry is concerned with gender, ecology, relationships, and complicity.
Chapter 1: Oil Engineer/Poet: The Energy Unconscious of S.C. Ells’s *Northland Trails*

**Introduction**

S.C. Ells (1878-1971) is remembered in Canada as the “father” of the tar sands—a stubborn, hands-on innovator who investigated the deposits in northern Alberta on behalf of the Canadian government and experimented with methods for separating bitumen from the sand. Ells was also a writer of poems, short stories, and essays about the North, who published a self-illustrated literary collection, *Northland Trails*, first in 1938 and then in an expanded edition in 1956. Officially living in Ottawa, Ells called Fort McMurray his second home between 1913 and 1945. His creative works reflect his passion for the Athabasca region and its residents, a problematic passion tied up with a colonial mindset, ambition, nostalgia, racism, and masculinism. I include Ells in my study of oil worker poetry because his is the earliest collection I have found written by a Canadian oil worker. Whereas the other poetry collections I study are what Tom Wayman calls *insider* work poetry, written from inside the experience of work (*Inside Job* 11), *Northland Trails* is interesting because Ells’s own oil work is so remarkably absent from it. In this chapter I argue that Ells’s oil work is un-representable in his poetry because it exposes the contradictions between his anti-modern ecopoetics and the modernization he hastened in the Athabasca region. As I demonstrate through a consideration of the “trails” of wilderness and modernization throughout the book and especially in the poem “The Athabaska Trail (1913),” the “energy unconscious” (Yaeger 309) of *Northland Trails* is the fear that the legacy of the father of the tar sands would be a nortland that Ells would no longer wish to live in.
Father of the Tar Sands

*While Sydney Ells from Ottawa*
*Rides around in his private car*
*Saying to himself with a smile of bliss—*
*“I am the guy that started this”*
— Al Wheeler, “Progress: Fort McMurray, 1928”

Sidney C. Ells was the engineer in charge of oil sands research for the federal Mines Branch from 1913 to 1935. Arriving in the sparsely populated trading post of Fort McMurray with a tiny operating budget in 1913, Ells set about researching the extent of the bituminous sand deposits now known as the Athabasca tar sands or oil sands, with an eye to which deposits would be the easiest to access, mine, and transport at a time when the rail and the roads had not yet reached so far north and transport was done by dog sled, canoe, and scow. In 1913, Alberta had been a province for less than ten years, and the former North-Western Territory, purchased by the Dominion of Canada from the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1870, was still considered an object of mystery, exploration, and promise for Canada, which held the mineral rights to the Athabasca region until they were transferred to Alberta in 1930. Ells had a home—and after 1928, a wife, Irene Currie—in Ottawa, but he travelled frequently to Fort McMurray, sometimes staying and working through the extremely cold winters.

A tough, hands-on leader who employed local labourers to help him do his work, Ells constructed machines and factories; drilled core samples; surveyed, mapped, and mined tar sands deposits; derived early methods for bitumen separation; transported shipments of bituminous sand; and paved experimental roads with asphalt made from it. As local dog sled driver,

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22 Readers may note inconsistencies in the spelling of Ells’s name in my sources. Although Ells used Sidney professionally, personally, and in his print publications, it appears that his legal name was Sydney (as shown on the register of the Beechwood Cemetery, where he was buried). I have chosen to follow his seeming preference for Sidney. Ells held undergraduate degrees in both arts and science from McGill University. He is often described as an engineer or a geologist, based both on his scientific background and the work that he did.
canoeman, and poet Al Wheeler’s description of Ells in his poem “Progress: Fort McMurray, 1928” shows, Ells was a privileged civil servant, not a typical miner, but out of both necessity and passion, Ells did oil work at almost every level imaginable. He retired in 1945 after a thirty-two-year career in the Mines Branch, with most of those years spent working on the oil sands. Ells lived to see the large-scale commercial development of the resource with the opening of the Great Canadian Oil Sands in 1967. He died in 1971.


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Ells also enlisted and was eventually deployed in the army during the First World War, although in the early years of the war he was sent back to continue his work on the tar sands as a potential fuel source for the war effort. Oil sands research was disrupted and at times halted because of the two world wars and the Depression. He was sent by the Mines Branch to work on other projects, including investigating oil shale deposits in other regions of Canada.
According to Ells’s memoir, Max Ball of Abasand Oils was the first to call Ells the “father of the Alberta bituminous sand research and development” in 1950 (qtd. in Ells, Recollections 89). Later references shorten Ball’s phrasing into variations on the nickname “father of the tar sands” (“Father”; McCook; “Pioneer”; Cleveland and Morris 135). Ells favoured this aspect of his reputation, but he is also remembered as stubborn, difficult, and disorganized. Barry Ferguson writes that Ells had “ungainly energy and enthusiasm” and a “somewhat overpowering personal style” (24; 29). He considers Ells to be an unreliable historical source (217n27). Mary Clark Sheppard, the daughter and biographer of Karl A. Clark—another early oil sands scientist whom Ells saw as a rival—describes Ells, diplomatically, as

>a powerful, self-confident individualist and adventurer, flamboyant in style and fired by the romance of the frontiers. He responded to new challenges with enthusiasm, loved to be caught up in the action and had flair in winning loyalty from those who served him. Up until April 1920, Ells was recognized as possibly the most knowledgeable man in Canada on the subject of tar sands. (80-81)

Ells fell from grace among the scientific communities in Ottawa and Alberta around 1920 in part because of Clark’s negative assessment of one of Ells’s reports. Although Ells initiated the scientific research on the oil sands that eventually led to megaprojects in Fort McMurray, in the latter decades of his career he was repeatedly thwarted and passed over in tar sands research in favour of Clark and others. By the time of his death, Ells could see that his legacy would be overshadowed by better-known innovators like Clark and Robert Fitzsimmons. Nonetheless, he is still considered an important figure in the history of the oil sands.

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24 An unauthorized version of Ells’s memoirs was published by the Mines Branch in 1962 and reissued by Syncrude sometime in the 1970s. All references to Ells’s Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands are to the Syncrude edition.

25 See Ells’s “Unofficial Notes,” “A ‘flash-back,’” and Note re: Karl A. Clark

26 See, for example, Chastko 7-19, 53-54; Comfort; Ferguson 22-30; Sheppard 80-81.
Rhymes of the Miner?

Ells is now remembered as an early figure in the (white, settler-colonial) history of the tar sands, but he is seldom recalled as also a writer of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction essays about the North and an accomplished illustrator of his own writing. I first heard of Ells on a visit to the Oil Sands Discovery Centre in Fort McMurray, where he appears in exhibits and documentary films, but it was not until I returned home to Winnipeg and stumbled upon “Wood Smoke” by S.C. Ells in E.L. Chicanot’s 1937 anthology *Rhymes of the Miner* that I learned Ells was also a poet. “Wood Smoke” is a poem in rhyming couplets and iambic metre inspired by the time two men lost in the snow found Ells’s camp near the Athabasca River when the wind changed and they smelled “Just a wisp of smoke!” (60). Like the lost men, I followed the trail of “Wood Smoke” to find what is likely the earliest collection of poetry written by an oil sands worker. It appears that Ells is not remembered as a literary figure in Fort McMurray or at the Oil Sands Discovery Centre, not to mention in Canada, but I found a copy of *Northland Trails* at my university’s library and several copies available for purchase from used book sellers online.

Ells’s writing belongs to the tradition of popular poetry, a tradition that, as Mike Chasar demonstrates in *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America*, flourished in the emergent consumer-capitalist culture of the early twentieth century. Chasar describes a culture “saturated by poetry of all types and sizes” (4), including advertising copy and jingles, poetry programs on the radio and columns in newspapers, and popular practices such as keeping poetry scrapbooks. A frequent contributor of both essays, poetry, and short stories to the

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27 The Wood Buffalo Regional Library (the public library in Fort McMurray) has a copy of Ells’s *Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands* but no copy of *Northland Trails*. The library at Keyano College, the community college in Fort McMurray, does not hold either book.

28 In fact, the University of Manitoba Libraries own two copies of the 1938 edition of *Northland Trails* and a copy of the 1956 edition that first belonged to Margaret Laurence.
Canadian Geographical Journal and the Canadian Mining Journal, Ells also produced annual Christmas cards with self-illustrated poems, stories, and essays, which he sent to a long list of friends and professional contacts between 1926 and 1970. Northland Trails, a book of poetry and prose illustrated with Ells’s pen-and-ink drawings, was published by Garden City Press (the publisher of the Canadian Mining Journal) in 1938, while he was still a civil servant working for the Mines Branch. Burns and MacEachern published a “new and enlarged” edition in 1956. Judging from the reviews of Northland Trails published primarily in newspapers and geological and mining periodicals, Ells’s poetry was well received by a wide range of readers, including more literary reviewers like R.C. Fetherstonhaugh, who writes, “[t]he quality of the work is uneven; but at its best it reaches a level which non-professional writers or artists too seldom attain” (35). Earnest and often dead serious, Ells’s writing can be heavy handed and too precise, yet it has moments of memorable passion and imagery of the North. Northland Trails is worth studying today because of Ells’s unique tar sands engineer’s perspective and the insights the writing offers into the engineer’s relationship with the land at a moment of energy transition.
The most striking element of *Northland Trails* is Ells’s drawings, which often exceed their description as mere illustrations, and which owe much of their charm to the detailed images of labourers, non-human animals, landscapes, sternwheelers, trappers, and other residents of the North (see, for example, Figure 2). This is a picture book as much as it is a literary collection, with the two-page format of many of the poems echoing their earlier production as Christmas cards. Ells’s short stories are lyrical and descriptive, lingering over the landscapes and livelihoods of the Athabasca region and pausing often to philosophize, especially on gender roles and masculinity, or on the relationship between humans and nature. Short, creative historical and geographical essays (for example, Ells’s “Stern-Wheel Saga” [20-21] and “LaLoche Portage” [190-202]) are in most cases reproduced or condensed from essays published in the *Canadian Geographical Journal*.

Ells’s poetry is old-fashioned for its time, with rhyming lines in iambic or ballad metre and an earnest tone. Most of the poems are preceded by prose introductions that one 1938 reviewer calls “delightful little explanatory notes” (Rev. of *Northland Trails*, Canadian Geographical Journal V) and another refers to as useful “factual data” to accompany the verse (Rev. of *Northland Trails*, Daily Colonist 4), but which in my reading often tell a story that the poem itself has avoided or failed to convey. Despite the regret Ells expresses in his preface to *Northland Trails* that he has no training as a writer (6), he demonstrates a general sense of literariness in his use of poetic technique and form. In particular, I recognize the influence of the “swinging verse rhythms” of Kipling’s popular poetry (Abrams et al. 1673) in Ells’s frequent use of the syncopated and sing-song rhythms of ballad metre. Like Kipling, Ells often doubles up

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31 All references, unless otherwise indicated, are to the 1956 edition.
32 See Ells’s reference to Kipling’s “If” in his memoir (*Recollections* 4). A handwritten note at the bottom of a typed copy of the poem in Ells’s fonds at the National Archive reads, “I have ‘lived’ every phrase of the above.” Ells clearly identified with the theme and sentiment of Kipling’s poem, but I also take this lone literary reference in the
ballad lines into longer lines of six or seven stressed syllables (a variation on the fourteener) that maintain the ballad rhyme scheme and form rhyming couplets grouped into long stanzas. Mid-line caesuras marked by a dash, a comma, or a pause preserve the ballad rhythm, as in these lines from “The Northern Gates”: “Two giants stood at the Northern Gates, and their names were Hunger and Cold, / And they sneered at the weak and faint-hearted—but they challenged the hardy and bold” (28). Like Robert Service, to whom he is compared on the dust flap of *Northland Trails*, Ells rejects modernist forms in favour of swinging ballad rhythms and iambic metre. Unlike Service’s colloquial, ironic rhyming northern verse that evokes everyday life situations of the mine and tavern, however, Ells’s poetry is formal and austere: while it is possible to read irony into Ells’s verse, the irony is almost always unintentional.

The content of *Northland Trails* is eclectic. Although most of the writing is set in the Canadian North, notable exceptions are several poems and one essay about the two World Wars, an essay on the “Covered Wagon Days” in United States history (76-79), and a short story, “Gold” (133-41), set in ancient Egypt. Poems and stories are usually set in the early twentieth century, or sometimes in the not-too-distant but already-idealized past of the fur trade; “Gold” is an exception to this rule, as are two poems, “Dawn” (58-62) and “Children of the Dawn” (63-67), about the prehistoric lives of dinosaurs and humans, respectively. Ells’s war writings are grouped together. Otherwise, the content of the book shifts from one topic to another seemingly randomly. As the title of the book suggests, the motif of the trail ties together the collection, connecting the terrestrial trails of voyageurs, trackers, pack horses, and the Alaska Highway with...
the sky trails of geese, metaphorical trails such as the “trails of war” (203), and the overarching themes of nation, empire, and progress. Ells’s emphasis on trails recalls the diverging roads of Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” (from Mountain Interval [1916]), with Ells’s preference for “the one less traveled by” (Frost 103) sometimes leading him to favour the modernizing trails of the engineer and at other times the old-fashioned trails of the fur trader.

One topic that is clearly missing from Northland Trails is the one I had hoped to read about: Ells’s oil work in the Athabasca region. This book of poetry and prose, which is very much concerned with the labour of voyageurs, trappers, polesmen, rivermen, animals, steamboats, and occasionally women, contains no significant references to Ells’s own labour as an engineer and civil servant who was known to work at times as a miner and labourer alongside his employees. Paul Fussell has argued that World War I poets shared both a general literariness shaped by The Oxford Book of English Verse and a tight-lipped, decorous masculinity reminiscent of the genre of the boys’ school story (155-90); such models for literary expression prevented soldiers from accurately portraying their experiences of the Great War. Ells, a contributor to and editor of the weekly soldiers’ newspaper Knots and Lashings during the Great War, seems to have applied the war poet’s combination of expression and restraint in Northland Trails.34 A 1938 promotional letter for Northland Trails by Garden City Press contrasts the role of the geologist (“S.C. Ells, F.R.G.S., F.G.S., etc.”) and the role of the poet: “Tabulated statistics dealing with the extent of land and water areas and potential resources have an important value. However, they can never correctly interpret a country.” Some early reviewers, however, seem to disagree with this understated explanation for the exclusion of Ells’s oil work from his creative

34 Knots and Lashings is replete with doggerel, including some poems written by Ells (see “Something ELLS For You,” 22 December 1917). All issues of Knots and Lashings, with Ells’s annotations, can be seen online at http://eco.canadiana.ca.uml.idm.oclc.org/view/oocihm.8_06845; the bound volume at the National Archive contains additional notes and correspondence (see Ells, Knots and Lashings).
writing. Their comments that Ells’s work is missing from the book imply that such a separation of scientific fact and literary interpretation is not necessary (see I.C.M.; James). In a 1962 letter of appreciation for Ells’s *Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands*, O.T.G. Williamson calls *Northland Trails* “much too modest and impersonal,” an instance of “hiding your light under a bushel,” where Ells did not take “full credit for the great work he has done,” but perhaps the absence of Ells’s oil work from his poetry is more complicated than mere modesty. I see it as a way of managing contradictions that were inherent to Ells’s work and his very presence in the North.

Even the seeming exceptions to the rule that Ells’s oil work is avoided, downplayed, and obscured are telling: Ells explains in an introductory note that the poem “Dawn,” which imagines the age of dinosaurs in the Athabasca region, was inspired by his discovery of fossil trees in the tar sands (58A). This reference to oil work is made in prose, detached from the poem itself, and printed on a page that was accidentally left out and had to be inserted in each copy by hand (Burns, 4 Aug. 1961)—a page that was missing from the library copy I first read. The poem titled “Oilers” celebrates the role of oil and of oil tankers in World War II (213-14), mentioning neither of the two WWII oil projects in Fort McMurray. The poem “The Athabaska Trail (1913)” shifts between outsider and insider perspectives on the experience of tracking a heavy boat along the Athabasca River; it is only in the introductory note to the poem that Ells refers to the overlap between the trackers he represents and his own experience of tracking the first shipment of bitumen south on the Athabasca River. In the short story “The Blazed Tree,” the

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35 The Canadian government took over of the Abasand plant on the Horse River between 1943 and 1945 in a botched attempt to fast-track the development of a new source of oil for the war effort (see Comfort; Chastko 25-54; Ferguson 97-121). The United States Army used Fort McMurray, the northernmost access point by rail, as the staging ground for the construction of the controversial and secret CANOL pipeline from Norman Wells to Whitehorse, built in 1942 to 1944 (Brennan; see also Comfort 84-87).
protagonist is called both Peter and David Grant, with his name standing in, carelessly, for Ells’s own name. Grant, who is a supervisor of prospectors (like Ells was a supervisor of surveyors), separates from his party and becomes lost in the bush. He nearly dies but finds his way after he sees traces of an old surveying base line. Grant pulls himself together, lights a cigarette, and makes a nonchalant entry into camp, never speaking of his adventure, which was “all in the day’s work” (148). I argue that in Northland Trails, Ells makes deflective moves similar to the one Grant makes in “The Blazed Tree,” avoiding writing (as Grant avoids speaking) about his work. He does this throughout the book, but especially in poetry, a form in which he constrained himself not only to particular rules about rhyme and metre but also to rules about content that allowed him to be effusive on themes like nature and progress but tight-lipped about his own work. If Ells did not want to consider the poetic, aesthetic, and ecological implications of his oil work, such constraints may have felt comfortable rather than restrictive, reinforcing a functional compartmentalization of work and pleasure, science and art, commitment to progress and love of wilderness.

According to work poet and anthologist Tom Wayman, any writing that does not account for work as the “governing experience of daily life is a literature with an enormous hole in the middle of it” (Inside Job 13). Wayman favours poetry about labour that is written not merely

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36 “The Blazed Tree” is one of three short stories by Ells that are thinly veiled autobiographies. “Oil Shale (Being a few notes on behalf of the pioneer women in Canada’s New North)” appears only in the 1938 edition of Northland Trails (141-46). In it, Alex Kingsford, a government geologist, is sent (as Ells himself was sent) to investigate the potential of oil shale from the Pasquia Hills region of Saskatchewan as a source of oil. The geologist’s work is not part of the story—he “[disappears] in the trackless unmapped wilderness” (144) and comes back five months later, concluding that the results of his investigations have been “of a negative character” (146). Instead, this is a tale about the loneliness of a young woman and the geologist’s intervention in her personal life to fix it. With its sarcastic dismissals of the viability of oil shale and its implied criticism of Ells’s own superiors (see 143), its representation of the relatively privileged life of a civil servant like Ells himself, and its convoluted structure, the unflattering entanglements of this story with Ells’s oil work may explain why it was left out of the 1956 edition. “The Message,” a story published in a 1932 issue of the Canadian Mining Journal but not collected in Northland Trails, is a dramatic, fictionalized version of Ells’s summoning from Fort McMurray to Ottawa to advise Max Ball on an optimal location for a tar sands operation in 1930 (cf. McLeish; Ells, Recollections 77-78).
about but from *inside* the experience of work (22); it is this insider’s perspective on work that is missing from *Northland Trails*. Wayman sees poetry about work as combatting the alienation of workers from their labour and of consumers from the sources of the products they purchase, but I think Ells desired both of these alienations. His labour occurred in an unrepresentable gap between his idealized versions of harmonious northern life and his techno-utopian visions of an industrialized North. Yet, repressed details of Ells’s oil work and its implications coalesce as an unconscious “subtext” (Jameson 66) that can still be traced in *Northland Trails*.

**Energy Transition and *Northland Trails***

The absence of Ells’s oil work in *Northland Trails* recommends a reading for its “energy unconscious” (Yaeger 309). In an essay on the periodization of literary texts according to “the energy sources that made them possible” (305)—that is, on considering energy sources as modes of production—Yaeger begins to theorize the energy unconscious as a version of Fredric Jameson’s political unconscious.37 She writes, “since fuel sources hover in the backgrounds of texts, if they speak at all, to pursue an energy unconscious means a commitment to the repressed, the non-dit, and to the text as a tissue of contradictions” (310n1). Jameson’s most basic definition of the political unconscious is “what the text represses” (33), made up of contradictions that resist closure, “which the text seeks in vain wholly to control or master” (34). Texts may attempt to manage such contradictions either by repressing them or by trying to resolve in literary form what cannot be so easily resolved in sociopolitical reality. Jameson

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37 Unfortunately, Patricia Yaeger, who passed away in 2014, was not able to further develop a theory of the “energy unconscious.” Further theorizations of the energy unconscious are needed—including ones that draw more broadly on Freudian and post-Freudian theories of the unconscious. While I have limited myself, following Yaeger, primarily to a Jamesonian theory of the political unconscious, this broader theory of the energy unconscious is something I plan to take up in future versions of this project. Thanks to Dawne McCance and Warren Cariou for their helpful comments and recommendations on the energy unconscious.
identifies three levels or frameworks for reading the political unconscious of literary texts, all of which are relevant to a reading of the energy unconscious of *Northland Trails*. First, as a symbolic act inside “political history” (Jameson 60), Ells tries and often fails to locate the tar sands engineer in the stories of the nation, the North, and the oil sands. Second, at the level of “society” (60), “units” of dominant ideology that Jameson calls ideologemes are perceptible in *Northland Trails* (Jameson 72-73), such as the racist and sexist ideas that justify Ells’s presence in the North as a civil servant and “pioneer” of industrialization. Third, at the level of a broader history that Jameson extends “from prehistoric life to whatever far future history has in store for us” (60)—and that we may therefore extend to the geologic and ecological shifts that the naming of the Anthropocene attempts to register—the clashes and transitions between pre-modern and petromodern modes of production, which Ells at turns evades and registers but cannot reconcile, are constellated as a Jamesonian “ideology of form” (62) or “cultural revolution” (81).

*Northland Trails* is an early petromodern text, a text tied to a moment of energy transition in Canada, when the era of fossil-fuel consumption, extraction, and production was in its infancy. Ells lived and worked in a pivotal moment in “the shift from the organic energy regime of muscle power, wood, wind, and water power to the mineral regime of coal, oil, gas, and electricity” that R.W. Sandwell describes as having occurred in Canada in the early twentieth century (3), adapting E.A. Wrigley’s terms for the old and new regimes in England to the Canadian context. Patricia McCormack shows that despite the dominant historical narrative that the fur trade ended in 1870, it persisted into the early twentieth century in the Athabasca region (“A World” 147); Ells arrived in the still-early days after the signing of Treaty 8 in 1899, when the fur trade mode of production was being slowly and only partially supplanted by new

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38 Stephanie LeMenager coined the term petromodernity, which she defines as “modern life based in the cheap energy systems made possible by oil” (67).
extractive industries. McCormack documents the arrival, after World War I, of white trappers “who trapped within a capitalist framework, mining the bush for fur” (*Fort Chipewyan* 274) and who increasingly encroached on territory and resources in the Athabasca region. It is these extractivist trappers, along with prospectors and miners of other resources, whom Ells celebrates. Ells participated in the transition in the Athabasca region between the fur trade relations that were foundational to the settler-colonial Canadian state (see Innis; Watkins, *Staples*) and a new Northern economy based on modern staples like bitumen (see Watkins, “Rejoinder”; Laxer). He was proud to be called the father of the tar sands. Yet, as Ells’s poetry shows, he wished both for the North to become modernized and for premodern fur-trade relations to persist. As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes, however, in *Friction*, where she considers the impacts of such shifts on Indigenous peoples and other inhabitants of new resource frontiers, energy transitions are characterized by friction and violence:

One, Natural resources are not God given but must be wrested from previous economies and ecologies in violent extractions.

Two: Such violence leaves none of us unscathed.

Three: This assault is no neighborhood storm. It gathers force from afar, entangling multiple local-to-global scales. (50)

Ells’s poetry was composed in a time and place of energy transition, friction, and the sublimation of violent extraction. His presence in the Athabasca region represented the interests of the state and of the global oil industry to come. The energy unconscious of *Northland Trails* is the knowledge that Ells was an agent, and not a victim, of the violent wresting of the land from the Chipewyan, Cree, and Métis, from the trappers and the voyageurs, and from the nonhuman animals—the “old comrades of paddle and pole, of tracking line and trail” to whom he dedicates his book.
Bob Johnson writes in *Carbon Nation* that in modernity “we have tended to worship the machine while shoving downstairs the more humble and yet equally important ecological story about how we as a species learned to harvest new energy sources and reroute energy circuits to make that machine and the world on which it depends run” (xxix). Ells’s struggle for professional recognition and his poetics that leaves out his oil work are each related to the sublimation of the ecological story of the tar sands. Although Ells appears to have been obsessed with his own reputation and the credit he felt that he deserved, the little-known story of the “father” of the tar sands is not the most interesting repressed content of the ecological story of the oil sands. For readers in the late-petromodern era of the early twenty-first century looking back at an earlier moment of energy transition—the transition to the energy system we must now disentangle ourselves from—the unspeakable and repressed contradictions between Ells’s colonial vision of an oil sands industry to come, his (also colonial) nostalgia for the seemingly pristine natural world of the fur-trade era, and his love of the land are painfully evident. Considering the energy unconscious of *Northland Trails* means inquiring into the repressions and ideologies that are foundational, residual, and in some cases still dominant in the petromodern era whose death throes we are now witnessing and whose logics we must break with for an energy transition that involves rethinking and decolonizing our land relations.

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39 The Sidney Clarke Ells fonds at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa, deposited by Ells himself, contain the detailed yet scattered papers of a person obsessively asserting, recording, and curating his own legacy. In addition to records and correspondence, photographs, newspaper clippings, originals of the illustrations for *Northland Trails*, and a copy of each of the Christmas greeting cards Ells made for decades, the fonds contain letters setting the record straight on several points related to the tar sands, and several disorganized and heavily annotated versions of Ells’s memoirs, which he appears to have revised multiple times in his retirement.
Tough Love

I have found no academic studies of *Northland Trails*. Some scholars have recently turned, however, to Ells’s *Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands* to consider the relationships the geologists, scientists, and explorers who investigated the tar sands had with the land and with Indigenous people. The dialogue between readings of the *Recollections* by sociologists Debra Davidson and Mike Gismondi and literary scholar Jon Gordon has informed my reading of *Northland Trails*.

In their book chapter “Visualizing the Tar Sands Through Time,” Davidson and Gismondi study images of the oil sands from the nineteenth century to the 1970s, considering how the images have functioned within a provincial narrative that emphasizes “industriousness” (39). They represent Ells as a “difficult and controversial” man with a disregard for nature (45), a pivotal figure in the shift toward large-scale extraction. They read his *Recollections* and earlier technical reports and conclude that Ells “literally took the measure of the place, concentrating his geologist’s eye on verticality and not on surfaces” (47). Here they summarize their reading:

> While engaging, and at times poetic, the reports and memoir are largely devoid of attention to nature and ecosystems. Natural systems (climate, local foods, disease, weather, terrain, and more) are subtly classified as either support or inhibition to extractive strategies. Nature was not denied, but circumscribed. At best the muskeg, forest and climate are presented as human trials, obstacles to be conquered. . . . Aboriginal people are glimpsed occasionally in the dotted lines on Ells’ maps around reserves, or in diary descriptions of their labor as trackers and freighters hauling the tar sands south. But like most reports of the age, they are empty of Aboriginal land uses. (48)

Davidson and Gismondi extend their reading of Ells’s writing to a characterization of Ells and his perspective: they suggest that he had only a vertical (extractive) view of nature and Indigenous people, and that he saw the land as so much overburden in the way of getting at the
bitumen. They argue that this visualization contributed to the way the industry continues to relate to the land.

Jon Gordon agrees that Ells’s *Recollections* are technical and unconcerned with nature, but Gordon is intrigued by the contradictory passions for “modernity and wilderness” that are apparent in the two poems used as the epigraph and epilogue (56). The poems, excerpted from *Northland Trails*, are a stanza from “The Seekers,” an ode to white prospectors as “*men of the new frontier*” (iii), and the full poem “Epilogue,” in which the speaker expresses his desire to be buried not in “*some crowded city of the dead*” but rather in the North, beneath a favourite tree (93). Gordon finds signs in these poems that Ells also loved the land that he exploited. He calls Ells’s poetry “attempts to balance opposing values: the globalizing forces of liberal, rational, technological progress that promise freedom and equality, and the local, particular, traditional forces that claim virtues of communion and continuity with nature” (57). Gordon adds a “however” to his citation of the same passage I have quoted from Davidson and Gismondi, referring to Ells and other early oil sands innovators: “However, that land to be conquered is also loved by these men whose actions threaten its very existence, and Ells’s poem can be read as an act of repressing his consciousness of that threat. Nature is an obstacle to be overcome but, once it is overcome, it will still persist unchanged” (57). Mary Clark Sheppard describes the last visit her father, Karl Clark, paid to Fort McMurray, to witness the bulldozers breaking ground for the Great Canadian Oil Sands (now Suncor) plant in 1965: “It affected him deeply to see the landscape of his beloved Athabasca country scarred as the construction gangs began stripping away the overburden for the operation . . . . [H]e confided to his daughter Mary that he had no

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40 This clichéd and perhaps insincere wish to be buried in the North (one that also often ends Robert Service’s poetry collections) was not fulfilled: Ells was buried alongside his family members at the Beechwood Cemetery in Ottawa (Beechwood).
wish to return again to the scene” (89-90). Although the early “pioneers” of the tar sands industry may have established scientific and distanced ways of seeing and representing the land from which they proposed to extract bitumen, Gordon observes that their adoption of such a perspective was conflicted and only partial. Both the industry’s celebration of these persistent men and the critics of their industriousness ignore the possibility that they may not have been glad to see the fruits of their labour. Gordon sees such contradictory desires adding “a minor thread of doubt” to triumphant histories of the oil sands industry (55). Although Gordon’s discussion is focused only on the two poems in the *Recollections*, he identifies contradictory themes that I will demonstrate also structure *Northland Trails*. Gordon sees Ells repressing in his poetry the knowledge that his work threatens the natural world and the North he claims to love.

In his argument that modernization also meant carbonization in the long twentieth century, Johnson refers to Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” to describe the divergence of organic and mineral energy systems. Johnson argues that choosing modernization through the combustion of fossil fuels was a choice “to go down the one that had never been travelled” (*Carbon* xviii) and that now “we don’t have the option of returning to the point where the road first diverged” (174). Johnson has the benefit of hindsight to make these observations, but Ells, living at a moment of divergence, may have seen the trails and their consequences less clearly. *Northland Trails* reveals a desire to keep two contradictory paths open—to hasten modernization while preserving seemingly untouched wilderness. The possibility that these paths are irreconcilable becomes apparent through Ells’s inability to represent the figure of the tar sands engineer in the present moment of a northern world transitioning from the old trails of the trappers and voyageurs to the futuristic roads, mines, and smokestacks of the engineer.
The denial and repression in Ells’s writing are not extraordinary. They are characteristic of (petro)modernity and, as Chris Turner summarizes, of Canadian identity:

There is a paradox in Canada’s relationship with its natural spaces that is older than the country itself, an awkward two-step attempting to balance the national economy’s deeply exploitive disposition toward resource development with a civil society increasingly oriented toward a gentler and more custodial role of sound environmental stewardship. (312-13)

I recognize the same contradiction Ells struggled with in myself every time I drive my car to the wilderness to go hiking or fly to a distant city in the name of environmental humanities research. Ells’s poetry prefigures the “contrary infatuations” that Dymphny Dronyk theorizes as structuring petromodern life (see my discussion of Dronyk’s poetry in chapter 3). While it is easy to criticize Ells’s hypocrisies and contradictions, I can also relate to them. Stan Dragland describes his study of Indian Agent Duncan Campbell Scott’s poetry as “a difficult act of love . . . that involves staying near him even when his company is hard to stand” (12). Sometimes I feel the same way about Ells, but I also recognize that staying with Ells is a way of staying with trouble I am inextricably entangled in (Haraway, *Staying*), and also “a difficult act of love” directed toward both Canada and my oil-addicted self.

**Wilderness and Modernity in Northland Trails**

The conflicting passions for “modernity and wilderness” that Gordon notes in his reading of Ells’s *Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands* manifest as contradictory trails in *Northland Trails*. I focus my reading of Ells’s poetry on the tension between a nostalgic love for the North and an optimistic commitment to progress. Beginning with his preface to *Northland Trails*, Ells establishes an ambivalent relationship with progress:

Mental reactions to the northern “scene” were acquired during upwards of forty years in the north and frequently under conditions of real hardship. It was a time when rivermen
who took a deep pride in their strength and skill, were equally versed in the use of paddle, tracking-line and pole. By way of contrast during more recent years, the revolutionary miracles of present day travel by air and by water, have largely eliminated hardship and have reduced exploration to an almost mechanical routine. (5)

A scientist by training and by trade, Ells thought of himself as an old-fashioned explorer. His love of hard work and trying circumstances are apparent in the preface and throughout the book, as seen in his celebration of the labouring bodies of polesmen and trackers, trappers and fur traders, settlers and other “pioneers,” paddlers, prospectors, animals, women, and even machines like the steamboat in “Fire Canoe,” with its “labouring breath,—the labouring breath of steam!” (13). Although he was fascinated by the ways in which energy transition impacted human labour, Ells, who had experienced both fur-trade and industrialized modes of production, preferred a less modern world. The riverman, an icon in *Northland Trails*, is an example of a way of life lost through modernization; Ells mourns this loss and others, despite his commitment to hastening “the revolutionary miracles” of modernization in the North. Although one might expect an engineer to be glad to do away with hardship and to turn difficult work into “an almost mechanical routine,” it is clear that the relative ease and routine of modern life was dull and uninspiring to Ells.

As both the form and the content of his poetry demonstrates, Ells was a modernizer but not a modernist. His aesthetic preference for old ways of doing things is reflected not only in his professional choices to ship by scow, camp in winter with no tents or stoves, and shovel tar sand by hand, but also in his old-fashioned verse, with its romantic portrayals of fur-trade-era ways of life in the North. As Bob Johnson suggests, the contradiction between modernizing professional goals and an aesthetic rejection of modernism should be more jarring than it is. Johnson describes a false “sharp distinction between what is called the culture of modernism . . .

41 See Ells, “Athabaska Trail” 328; Ells, *Recollections* 45-46; Clark 172, 220-21.
and the materiality of our modernity” as the reason why dominant “historical narratives of modernity, modernism, and modernization” have failed to account for the significance of energy sources and energy transitions in modern life (Carbon xxii). Hegemonic forms of cultural production have used this false distinction to avoid seriously accounting for the processes and impacts of modernization and fossil fuel extraction, production, and consumption. As an agent of energy transition who embraced modernization but rejected modernism and modern ways of life, Ells embodied a contradiction between two “northland trails,” between the engineer’s futuristic vision and the nature poet’s nostalgia. While the nature and fur-trade poems are focused on the land and particular ways of living on it, Ells’s poems about technology lift off from the land, imagining techno-utopian futures for the North that seemingly have no place for trappers, voyageurs, non-human animals, women, or even the tar sands engineer who likes to get his hands dirty. Ells himself functions in an un-representable middle ground between the fur trade economy and his imagination of a “fossil economy” to come (Malm 4).

“The Lure of the North” (Wilderness)

The most prominent theme or trail in Northland Trails is what Ells calls the “Lure of the North,” which he defines in his introductory note to the poem “The Siren”: “Even as of old, sinister Sirens still sing their alluring songs. But one—the Siren NATURE—lures men back to the freedom and true contentment of the Canadian Northland. In a word, the ‘Lure of the North’ is merely the lure of living close to Nature” (102). In poetry and prose about northern life, Ells relates to the land horizontally, not only in the vertical way that Davidson and Gismondi describe: he looks out over it, he walks on it and makes trails, and he attends to the natural world that he may have viewed instrumentally through his work as an engineer. As “The Siren”
suggests, the Lure of the North is represented in two ways throughout the book: first, as the draw of living close to nature and the land, and second, as sexual desire for a northland personified as a woman. In both cases, however, despite his longing for intimacy with the land, the poet misrecognizes the fur-trade mode of production as a natural, indigenous way of relating to the land; he fails to recognize the colonial, patriarchal, and extractive position of the white trapper or tracker as already representing a broken relationship with the land. The unconscious subtext of Ells’s nature poetry shows that the engineer’s professions of love for the land are premised on acts of violence against Indigenous people, women, and the land.

Many poems express affection for the land—such as in the thrill of navigating rapids in “White Water” (15), the “muted music” of the arrival of geese as “Stout-hearted heralds of the verdant Spring” in “My Symphony” (47), the “glittering glaciers” of “Camp Fire” (98), and even the harsh beauty of winter in the “Chill and cold, chill and cold” of “Yesterday” (110). In the doubled-up ballad lines of “Hunger,” Ells contrasts the hunger of the long winter in the North with other forms of hunger that he considers more toxic: “Hunger for wealth and power, hunger for place and fame; / Hunger for glittering baubles and for the crowd’s acclaim” (53). In what seems a crass comparison between near starvation in some cases and the “endless struggle and strife” of city life (53), Ells declares his affection for the North. The closing lines of this odd poem are some of the most memorable in Northland Trails, because of their fervour, anapestic rhythm, and gentle rhymes:

For I’ve drunk of the northern streams—and I hunger for scenes that I know, Decked in summer’s bright mantle of green, or winter’s white mantle of snow, And the great winds call from the hill tops, and the soft airs whisper “come,” And their voice is the voice of the northland—calling me . . . calling me home! (53)

Here Ells makes claims on the land by describing an embodied presence on it, an integration into its systems (for example, its water cycle), and a sense of connection deep enough to call this
place “home.” Although his engineer’s perspective might be expected to cause him to reject the harshness of the northern climate and try to fix it (by making the North more like the city), the nature poet’s perspective wins out in this poem and others.

It is no accident that Ells uses gendered language to describe the “Lure of the North” in “The Siren”: its call is meant for men. Although “Women Pioneers” are praised in one poem for their “unsung” role in the colonial project to “push the frontier back” (75), they are represented as martyrs who lay “their lives upon the altar of their country” (73), not leaders in the heroic story of the pioneers. As Carolyn Merchant argues in The Death of Nature, modernity is premised on the concept of a passive, inert, feminized earth, available for exploitation by men, and by practices of the domination of both women and the earth. For Ells, “the call of the North” (125) summons only adventurous, brave, and stubborn “Men of the North” (57)—that is, white newcomers who prove themselves through hard work and endurance. They make a home in the North and a claim on behalf of empire to the land they occupy by seeing its beauty, by working on it, by displacing traditional Indigenous land uses and the labour of Indigenous men, by dressing in buckskin and sleeping in teepees, and, often, by marrying Indigenous women.

The figure of a sexualized woman calling men to the North is used in drawings that accompany poems like “The North” (10) and “The Siren” (102). These images evoke classical and colonial European history and mythology. Personifications of the land and the North as a woman carry imagery of luscious comfort. Yet the North can be harsh, too, and the contrasts are described, ambivalently and sometimes misogynistically, as the characteristics of women, as in this stanza from “The Trapper’s Farewell”:

The North is a wanton and shrew,—ragged, ill tempered, perverse,
The North is a mother stern,—yet a grimly tolerant nurse,
A heartless mistress of men,—hated and loved and feared,
But she reigns in the hearts of the northern race,—alone, unchallenged, revered. (216)
Notably, the characterization of the land and nature as an “unchallenged, revered” woman attributes more power to her than is allowed to other women in what one 1939 reviewer of the book calls “a fine monument to the memory of an era which is closing, an era of rugged virility, of dauntless spirit, of simple, unconscious, indomitable manhood” (“Canada’s Northland”). Ells’s preference for patriarchal gender relations that favoured indomitable and dominating men pushes back at the idea that modernity is liberating for women and proposes to keep in place the fur-trade gender roles he favours. The North personified as a woman may be powerful, but even this revered woman is ultimately dominated by men in *Northland Trails*.

The erotics of exploration, extraction, and empire is most apparent in the poem “The Challenge,” which is accompanied by an image of a semi-nude androgynous figure (54). Mixing feminine and masculine imagery and queering relationship with the land (as both a “stern compelling mistress” and “a lusty young giant” [55]), this poem incites invasion and domination:

From rock-ribbed hills comes a challenge, to men of hammer and drill,
And trackless wilderness whispers, “Come, tame me if you will,”
And a taunt comes up from shadowy vale, “Come bridge me with lofty span.”
And sullen roar of mighty fall cries, “Harness me if you can;”
There’s challenge in nodding blossom, high up in crannied wall,
The challenge of flaming passion, rings like a bugle call,
There’s challenge in pain and suffering, there’s challenge in human need,
In work and play and pleasure, in breathless goddess,—Speed;
Over and under earth and sea and up through trackless air,
The Universe rings with challenge,—to men who will do and dare! (55)

These lines encapsulate the patriarchal-colonial impulse to dominate and control, directed onto the body of a sexualized human and onto the land from which natural resources are extracted.

“The Challenge” suggests that Ells saw his own determination and stubbornness as responses to a challenge from the northland he desired and loved. *Northland Trails* celebrates the persistence of Northern white men who feel the “Lure of the North” and “who won’t take ‘No’!” (32). In the
context of its own sexualizing imagery for the land, the refusal to accept a no rings of rape, invasion, and violation, perpetrated by a virile, colonial masculine subject who ignores the resistance of the land and the people who live on it, hearing “no” as a challenge and a taunt rather than a refusal.

The actual women in *Northland Trails* are, with few exceptions, Indigenous women. For example, the speaker of the poem “Wasaya” is a white man married to “a native girl” (92), Wasaya, who draws him home from the trapline to “warmth and shelter and cheerful firelight glow” (96). The speaker finds balance and harmony not only in the Athabasca region, “Where the murmuring voice of the river sings through the summer long, / Till its music is hushed under mantle of snow, when days of summer are gone” (93), but also in the “mutual helpfulness” of the division of labour between a white man of the North and a knowledgeable and capable Indigenous wife (96). As Sylvia van Kirk demonstrates in *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870*, this racialized and gendered division of labour that depended on the unpaid reproductive labour of Indigenous women was characteristic of and integral to the fur trade.42 Although he does not acknowledge this history, Ells’s speaker echoes the long-standing idea that southern Canadian women are not suited to life in the North. He contrasts fur-trade gender relations with “man-made marriage vows, feeble as ropes of sand” in the south (96).43 The short stories “Playboy” (149-65) and “Squawman” (166-79) echo similar ideas, with Ells’s use of the racial slur *squaw* nonetheless revealing the racist attitudes and ambivalence that lie

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42 Van Kirk tracks the shifting acceptability of marriages of white traders and Indigenous women in the early decades of the fur trade, later to the Métis and “half-breed” daughters of other traders, and eventually to white women, following the establishment of settlements and the lifting of what amounted to a century-long ban on European women in the North.

43 This is an interesting position for Ells to take, given his own marriage and domestic life in Ottawa.
just under the surface of his admiration. Ells ends “Wasaya” with a claim that for white
northern men, Indigenous women made the best wives:

   In winter’s cold or summer’s heat, by water and by trail,
   Tho’ game and fish elude our skill and tho’ the trap-lines fail,
   In want or plenty, joy or pain, in storm or cloud or sun,
   Shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand, we face the North—as one!” (96)

The Indigenous wife figures as home, comfort, and shelter in “Wasaya” and throughout the
book. She serves both as a personification of the beloved Northland and as a way of indigenizing
the man who marries her, lending legitimacy to his claim to the land and to call the North his
home. She gives her labour—both the reproductive labour necessary to keep a household going
and her paddling, hunting, trapping, and tanning labour subsumed “as one” under her husband’s
labour—and supplies important local connections to make the endeavour of the Man of the North
successful.

Peter McKenzie-Brown describes Ells’s “Epilogue,” insightfully, not as a love or nature
poem but as “a dreamy but plaintive assertion of the value of his life as a northern pioneer” (59).
The trail of the “Lure of the North” functions both to convey Ells’s affection for the North and to
reveal the violence inherent in his colonialist and masculinist claim on the land. Yet, if the
speaker of many of the poems in Northland Trails is perhaps more of a predator than a lover of
nature, he is naïve to this fact. The writer’s affection for the northland is the most emphatically
portrayed theme in the book. Ells’s ardour is palpable, and for some readers overdone. John S.
Tener writes in a 1957 review,

   There is a curious blend of naivety and reality in the writings of Ells, naivety when he
discusses the motivations of men but reality when he deals with some aspects of the

44 In a literary reading he gave for the Montreal Women’s Club, Ells said, “Please do not think that I endorse the
idea of white men marrying natives” (Lecture Notes), but in Northland Trails he does seem to endorse this idea. Ells
was clearly aware that he was writing about a suppressed aspect of the history of the fur trade in western Canada,
which has traditionally been understood as “a totally male sphere” (van Kirk 13) rather than the “integrated,
multicultural social world” that it became (Brownlie and Korinek 3).
character of the wilderness. His descriptions of pioneers, generally, are painted too vividly and the violence of the northern wilderness as he depicts it suggest [sic] a rather constant state of war between man and his environment. One might suspect that men and their motives were less noble and were more complex than Ells suggests. (XV)

When Tener discusses the “reality” of Ells’s depictions of the North, he refers to the harshness of life there, and perhaps also its beauty, both of which Ells makes great efforts to convey. Tener’s observations about the “naivety” of Ells’s representations of “men and their motives” opens up space to look at Ells’s own motives and the tension between what he is able to convey about northern life and what remains unspoken and perhaps unthought in the collection. As Tener observes, Ells oversimplifies things; he does so by ignoring contradictions that are the very intersections at which he worked and lived in the North. The “Lure of the North” carries contradictions within itself, as is suggested by the hints that love for the land can also be violent.

Métis scholar and poet Emma LaRocque writes that “It is important that we understand colonial subterfuge behind the fantastic hero-ification of the White man” (36). LaRocque identifies “modernization” as a third phase of colonization that followed the “pre-Confederation” and “Confederation” phases (75); that is, she shows, as Glen Sean Coulthard also does, that the dispossession of Indigenous people is an ongoing primitive accumulation of land for the Canadian state and economy (Coulthard 9). With the white prospectors, fur traders, and engineers he celebrates, Ells worked as an agent of Canadian colonization at a frontier of resource extraction. He perceived the land as terra nullius, as seemingly unused wilderness, available for appropriation, while, as LaRocque demonstrates, the land had been previously settled by First Nations peoples, and already colonized through explorers, epidemics, missionaries, the fur trade, and the treaties. The fact that the Indigenous women he exoticizes already knew how to live on the land indicate that it was already inhabited, that his claim was illegitimate, and that his relationship to nature and “wilderness” was not as natural as he thought.
Progress (Modernity)

In his prefatory note to the poem “Followers of the Grail,” Ells describes progress—“striving to make life easier and better for others”—as a modern quest and a model of heroism to replace the Arthurian quest for the holy grail (68); inside the poem, Ells figures “service for the common good” and research as replacements for the grail. Wielding science as a “magic wand” (69) and bringing “new-found leisure” (70) and cures for “plague and pestilence” (72), researchers, scientists, and engineers are compared in Ells’s poem to Arthurian knights, “the gallant conquering band of Followers of the Grail” (72). The middle stanzas of “Followers of the Grail” appear on a two-page spread, flanked by drawings of a technologized, modern North. Smoke or steam rises without irony or anxiety from each image—from a scientist’s test tube, smoke stacks, steam engines, funnels on a ship, and chimneys. The few human figures in this mechanized world are all men at work—a chemist in a lab, an engineer drafting designs for a bridge, a construction worker pausing to look out over the city while grasping the hook of a crane. The lines sing happily, “The research workers point the way, research waves magic wand; The tall stacks rise against the skies and factories crowd the land” (70), despite Ells’s complaints elsewhere about such developments in cities. Radium, a “talisman” that the men “wrest from the North . . . to conquer death and pain” (71), is celebrated like a grail here. The reference to the minerals mined at the Eldorado Mine at Fort Radium, Northwest Territories, however, now recalls connections with the Manhattan Project and the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as radiation exposure among miners and the long-term exposure of the Sahtú Dene people through employment as transporters of radium and decades of living, hunting, and
fishing on contaminated territory.\textsuperscript{45} Even though he worked at the Mines Branch, Ells would not have been able to make these connections at the time that he wrote this poem, sometime before the publication of the first edition of \textit{Northland Trails} in 1938. Although we can now see irony and even tragedy in these images and poetic lines, they are in keeping with the dominant modernizing and settler-colonial perspective geographer Bruce Braun describes to contextualize Emily Carr’s late-1930s paintings of clear-cuts: “In a province built on the exploitation of natural resources, clearcuts and smokestacks represented progress. At the time, images of industry were just as likely as images of nature to appear on postcards” (213). While Arthurian tales, in particular Sir Thomas Malory’s version, warn against seeing magic as necessarily good, and although we now know that some of the quests highlighted in this poem do not end well, Ells uses these examples to create an optimistic and idealistic imaginary of a modern North.

In addition to the metaphor of the grail, Ells also uses the metaphor of the trail to celebrate progress, but he must do this carefully, because of his affection for other “northland trails,” and because he believes that some trails do not need to be improved upon. He must distinguish between the trail of progress and other trails he wishes to preserve:

\begin{quote}
An old, old trail winds down to a ford and over snow-blocked divide,
And a new trail lies where the grey goose flies, high over the valley wide;
An engineer’s vision, for countless feet, has smoothed a weary trail,
And generations bless his name—this Follower of the Grail. (70)
\end{quote}

Ells, a lover equally of old trails, of nature, and of the “engineer’s vision,” takes pains here to give similar weight to the three trails he describes. Rather than have the engineer improve the “old, old trail” of a tradition he deeply respects (such as the La Loche Portage)\textsuperscript{46} or even the “new trail” of the goose (which he could have replaced, unpoetically, with an airplane), Ells has

\textsuperscript{45} See Clements; Délı́nę Dene Band Council; Nikiforuk, “Echoes.”
\textsuperscript{46} For references to the La Loche Portage in \textit{Northland Trails} see 190-202; 84; 89-91.
the engineer smooth an unnamed “weary trail” that “countless feet” have trod (seemingly by
turning a trail into a road). By creating a “weary trail” that is separate from the “old trails” of the
fur trade that he reveres, Ells makes imaginative space for both the old ways of life in the North
and the innovations of the engineer, but a reader who tries to locate the two in space and time
may find that they overlap or become incompatible. Despite Ells’s efforts to make congruous his
sentimentality about the fur trade and his faith in progress, the trail of modernization constantly
presses in on and threatens the other trails; this is a threat that Ells struggles to manage and that
he cannot acknowledge without destabilizing the separate identities of the nature poet and the
mining engineer.

Figure 3. S.C. Ells’s drawing of the Abasand plant in 1942. Caption: “General view of Abasand plant near
McMurray, Alberta. Drilling rig, shovel, and shale planer are seen in foreground. Refinery equipment is
in rear of power house and separation buildings. In background an exposure of bituminous sand rises 140
feet above the Horse River.” From S.C. Ells, “Research Touches the North,” Canadian Geographical
The imagery and illustrations in “Followers of the Grail” resonate with Ells’s World War II-era essay for the *Canadian Geographical Journal*, “Research Touches the North: Commercial Potentialities of Alberta’s Bituminous Sands—to Meet Allied Oil Needs for Times of Peace and War.” In his illustrations, Ells contrasts images of the Abasand tar sands plant as it actually looked in 1942 (see Figure 3) and of an imagined future Abasand plant (Figure 4). Ells’s drawings were made after the Abasand plant burned down in 1941 and was reconstructed in 1942. (The plant would burn again in 1945 and not be rebuilt. I visited the site in 2017 [see page 15].) Ells’s futuristic plant is a scaling up of the Abasand plant. Darlene J. Comfort comments on the similarities between the Abasand plant of the 1940s and the Suncor and Syncrude plants of the 1980s (96), but she sees in Ells’s “visionary sketch” an imagination of more efficient and perhaps more lucrative ways of developing the oil sands than what would materialize in the Great Canadian Oil Sands plant in 1967 (134). In a description of the image he wrote on the back of his original drawing, Ells calls it an “Idealistic ‘set up’ for tar sands plant + production” (“Idealistic”), and I contend that idealistic, rather than visionary, is an accurate way to describe the image.
Ells writes in “Research Touches the North” that he “visualizes a time when bituminous sand may take its place as one of the principal sources of petroleum on the American continent” (262) and “a time when McMurray may become one of the leading oil producing centres of the North.”
American continent” (267), but his image of a future Abasand plant is not adequate to this vision because he cannot imagine the massive scale that mines and refineries designed to meet growing demand for petroleum would later assume, nor the scaling up of environmental impacts that would accompany expanded tar sands extraction and processing.

Ells’s future oil sands plant is edged by trees; it is clean and modern; the only water adjacent to the plant is the Horse River, imagined as a shipping route (there are no tailings ponds); gravity is used to move oil and “sand,” which is seemingly the only waste product of bitumen extraction and refining (no toxic tailings nor huge piles of sulphur); and the conversion of the bituminous sand into oil is done on site in a process that runs all the way from excavation to fuelling cars and airplanes (no pipelines carry relatively low-valued diluted bitumen for refining in other countries). This may be an innovative image, but it is also an irresponsible one, not grounded in material reality or scientific fact. Nowhere in Ells’s essay is this image signalled as an imaginary future for the tar sands; the lack of a caption for only this illustration makes it seem either that such a plant already exists or that its future existence is inevitable—yet this is a dream image, an idealized future as much as Ells’s descriptions of the fur-trade era represent an idealized past. It reveals Ells’s incomprehension of the scale, waste, and disregard for nature of a profit-driven oil sands industry to come.

Although “speculative futures” are now privileged in the environmental humanities as a way of jump-starting the energy transitions we struggle to imagine (see Graeme Macdonald, “Improbability”; Jekanowski), this speculative image from an earlier energy transition is a cautionary tale about the limits of speculation. As Donna Haraway argues, speculation must be grounded and “response-able” (Staying 98), engaged in sympoiesis as “making-with”—as collaboration with earth and non-human others (5). Ells’s speculative vision is irresponsible-able
because it fails to account for the impacts of large-scale tar sands production on the land he claims to love. In this drawing, as in the illustrations for “Followers of the Grail,” Ells assumes that future innovators will respect the land; he makes this assumption by ignoring the already established violences of extractive colonialism.

“The Seekers” is a poem “Dedicated to the Canadian Prospector” that traces a trail of progress as the lineage and legacy of prospectors, who, as the introductory note describes, “are the spiritual descendants of the restless adventurers of untold past generations” (42). The poem equates the prospectors with voyageurs and explorers, “men of the paddle and pack!” and “men of the northern trails!” (43)—a useful connection for Ells, who was a prospector of a sort, and who idolized earlier versions of northern masculinity. Thus, he links the prospector’s modernizing project with earlier versions of the colonization of the land that he perceives as more natural and in tune with the land. But the “men of the new frontier” (the prospectors) are also different from their predecessors, not only “Brothers of” earlier “bold explorers,” “musing dreamers,” “earnest plodders,” “eager searchers,” “lonely watchers,” and “selfless workers,” but also “sires of industry”:

Sires of glowing smelters, sires of throbbing mills,
Sires of lofty sentinel stacks peering above the hills,
Sires of towering headframes etched against northern sky,
Sires of clanging shop and forge, sires of industry;
Sires of myriad happy homes, sires of broad highways,
Sires of humming turbines below the deep forebays;
And countless silent “horses” leaping o’er vale and hill,
Follow the trail of men of the north—the men of hammer and drill. (43)

The legacy of the prospectors shifts noticeably from the past stories of hardy men of the North to the stories of technology and the machine, and from the language of brotherhood to the emphasis

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47 In the context of Ells’s scientific, technological, and colonial modernism, I interpret Ells’s reference to “spiritual descendants” to mean that these men share the restless spirits of earlier adventurers, not to refer to a religious tradition.
on colonial extraction as patrilineal reproduction and even monarchical domination. The offspring of the prospectors—“glowing smelters,” “throbbing mills” (themselves eroticized and masculinized)—are products of the men’s domination and appropriation of nature, not of harmonious relationship with the natural world. Paralleling the hyperbole that made Ells the father of the tar sands (that is, of a geological formation that outdates him by millions of years), the prospectors in “The Seekers” are represented not only as the fathers of the new technologies they develop but also as kings of the landscapes into which the technologies are integrated—the “hills,” the “northern sky,” and a “myriad happy homes.”

The prospector’s legacy is lively and energetic, but not alive and not human. Like the horsepower that is powerful but not a real horse, the other descendants of the prospectors are mechanical servants to humans. The humming of the turbine replaces the songs of the voyageurs in a way that signals a sad tone within Ells’s song to the prospector. With the advent of large-scale extraction and production, “The Seekers” pushes away from more intimate relationship with the land and shifts to the kind of vertical visualization described by Davidson and Gismondi, which asks only what it can take from the land. The more relational “men of the northland trails” are no longer needed in the prosthetic relations of a modern extractive regime. Traditional land use and ongoing Indigenous and settler ways of life in the North are absent from this poem that assumes the North can be mechanized as a source of raw materials without disrupting its ecosystems or the human and nonhuman communities that dwell in it.

Ells’s other progress poems are unequivocal in their celebration of modernization, and just as removed from the physical locations of the nature poems. The characters in these poems are either abstract figures of the scientist, prospector, and engineer or allegorical figures such as the “[t]wo giants” of the North, Hunger and Cold (28), who are vanquished by the arrival of
airplanes in “The Northern Gates” (27-29), contradicting the speaker’s preference for even a hungry northern life over modernization in “Hunger” (52-53). Nowhere does Ells use the first-person pronoun “I” in reference to science, prospecting, or the engineer, and although figures like engineers are celebrated in the abstract, no individual engineers appear in the poems. There are no poems or lines to parallel “Wasaya” or other poems that explore the inner world of the labourer. How do the engineers—for example, the ones who “sang the old, old songs of home,—the songs of other days” (226) while building the Alaska Highway—feel about the ways in which they are changing the land? How do they see the land itself and their place on it? Ells evades these questions by distancing himself from the land in his progress poems. The trail of the “followers of the grail” must not be seen to interfere with the “old trail” that Ells wishes to preserve; it must be imagined, like the “new trail” of the goose in the sky, to leave no mark on the land.

**Modernity and Wilderness on the Athabaska Trail**

The contradictions between the trails of modernity and wilderness become apparent in poems like “The Seekers,” where Ells lines up settlers, fur traders, and prospectors in a progression toward modernization. In other poems where Ells tries to overlap and intersect the trails, the contradictions threaten to undo the logic and the poetics of the nature-loving engineer. This is apparent in “The Gadfly” (85-88), which attempts to naturalize the impulse “[t]o push the last horizon back” (88), as if that impulse came from the land itself. It is also evident in “My Lullaby” (45), where, although Ells seems to have set out to suggest that the technological lullabies of “[a] smelter’s muffled murmur . . . . the voice of rumbling mills” can compare to the sounds of the natural world, he changes his tune in mid-poem, deciding that he prefers the
natural lullaby of “water’s muted symphonies” (45). In Jameson’s terms, these poems figure “cultural revolution”: “that moment in which the coexistence of various modes of production becomes visibly antagonistic, their contradictions moving to the very center of political, social, and historical life” (81). I use a close reading of the poem “The Athabaska Trail (1913)” to highlight this dynamic of cultural revolution because this poem represents an intersection of modernity and wilderness where Ells’s oil work becomes briefly visible as it overlaps with fur-trade-era tracking labour. 48

“The Athabaska Trail (1913)” is about Ells’s favourite trail, a trail he trod himself in 1913:

Theres many a trail winds away to the northward,—
Through swamp and muskeg and bottom land wide,—
But the trail that once carried the wealth of the northland
Was the tracker’s trail by the river side. (38)

If the trail is a metaphor that unifies this collection, Ells asserts here that “the tracker’s trail by the river side” is the ultimate trail of the North. 49 Trackers were fur trade-era labourers who towed boats against the flow of the river, harnessed to a tracking line and walking trails along the shore or sometimes in the river. Ells’s special reverence for trackers is reflected in the choice of a drawing of trackers pulling a loaded boat up the river for the front cover of the 1938 edition of Northland Trails. Ells makes his assertion through an appeal to economics and to the utility of

48 Ells uses Athabaska, the official government spelling for the name of the river from 1902 to 1948 (“District of Athabaska”; Zaslow 64).
49 Ells may also be distinguishing his “Athabaska Trail” from other trails and other poems about them, including earlier poems by Robert Service, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Al Wheeler. Service travelled along the Athabasca River on his way to the Yukon in 1911 (Mallory 119-29). His poem “Athabaska Dick” is about an expert steersman who dies trying to save another crew member (or is it the “pilfered flask of ‘rye’” in the man’s coat pocket [46]?) in the Big Cascade rapids. Doyle’s poem “The Athabaska Trail” recalls a trip “with the packer and the packhorse on the Athabasca Trail” in 1914—an overland trip, not the trail walked by trackers along the very edge of the river. Wheeler, a trapper and fur trader whom Ells hired as a dog-sled driver and “canoeman” and whom Ells counted as a friend (see Ells, Note re: Al Wheeler), includes two poems titled “The Athabaska Trail” in his chapbook Away Down North. The first is about the “wet, wet trail” of the river (2), travelled by the crew on a scow going downstream (north); the second describes a dog-sledding trip between Fort McMurray and Fort McKay. None of these earlier poems are about tracking, and Ells may be both locating his poem within a literary tradition and pointing to what is distinctive about his version of “The Athabaska Trail.”
the trackers’ trail in the transportation of furs (as wealth) out of the northland. Yet, there is also a double meaning of “the wealth of the northland”: the trail that once carried the furs of the fur trade also carried what Ells saw as the new wealth of the northland—bituminous sand—in a brief moment of overlap between the fur-trade and tar-sand economies of the Athabasca region.

The date in the title of “The Athabaska Trail (1913)” refers not to the date of writing but to an historical event—Ells’s first shipment of bitumen south along the Athabasca River in 1913. An essay and poem fragment titled “The Athabaska Trail (1916)” follows this poem; the Alberta and Great Waterways Railway reached as far as Cache 23, relatively near Fort McMurray, in 1916. The railway would reach even nearer locations at Old Waterways and Waterways in 1921 and 1926, respectively (Ells, “Athabaska Trail” 338). The advent of rail transport ended the system of transport through the white-water section of the Athabasca River that used scows guided by the expert rivermen (bowsmen, steersmen, and trackers) who are the subjects of many of Ells’s poems. “The Athabaska Trail (1913)” recalls the experience of tracking a scow upstream before the arrival of the rail. Ells romanticizes and idealizes the 1913 journey as an experience of wilderness and of satisfying (if difficult) labour, but a reading for the energy unconscious of the poem, as well as Ells’s other versions of the story, reveals that fur trade-era labour was already extractive, colonial, and alienating. Furthermore, it reveals that the oil sands engineer cannot be an innocent or neutral participant in tracking labour: not merely a colleague of the trackers, he is a boss, a colonizer, and an agent in making them obsolete.

According to Ells’s historical essays for Canadian Geographical Journal, the Athabasca River replaced the earlier La Loche Portage as the preferred route for the fur trade after the

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Canadian Pacific Railway reached Calgary in 1883 and a wagon road was completed between Fort Edmonton and Athabasca Landing in 1886. Between 1886 and 1915 “all freight, both for the Hudson’s Bay Company and for the Missions, was diverted through Athabaska Landing” ("Athabaska Trail" 331-32). The Athabasca was also a travel route for Klondikers during the gold rush of 1898, for teams of surveyors with the Geological Survey of Canada, and for the 1899 Treaty 8 commission. Although stern-wheel steamers began operating north of Fort McMurray to Fort Smith in 1886 and between Athabasca Landing and Grand Rapids in 1887, the Athabasca between Grand Rapids and Fort McMurray was unpassable by these larger boats. Freighting along this eighty-five mile “white water section of the river” (332) was done on flat-bottomed, square-ended boats called scows, with rowing sweeps on the sides, poles for pushing away from rocks, and a long rudder in the stern (“Athabaska River Transport” 51). See Guy Blanchet’s map, with drawings of scows, in Figure 5. When travelling downriver (that is, going north), this trip took between one day and one week. Because the flow of trading goods moved primarily northward to Fort McMurray, most scows were broken up for lumber upon arrival. Usually, only furs were sent south as cargo. When such upriver (southward) travel was necessary, the scows were pulled by teams of men harnessed to tracking lines, walking along the shore and pulling the boats against the current, moving at a much slower pace than the downstream journey.
Ells describes tracking labour in his prose introduction to “The Athabaska Trail (1913)”: 

*Prior to the advent of the internal combustion engine along northern rivers, south-bound cargoes of furs were “tracked” upstream by brigades of large canoes and heavy bateaux—sometimes for many hundreds of miles. Crews of men harnessed to heavy “tracking” lines, hundreds of feet in length, fought their way grimly along the shores, often through tangle of overhanging brush, knee deep mud and waist deep water. The ceaseless torture of myriads of flies from daylight till dark, the harassing and heavy work which only the strongest men could long endure, made “tracking” one of the most brutal forms of labor.* (36)

The facing page is devoted to a full-page illustration of trackers hauling scows upstream on the Athabasca (see Figure 2). The trackers’ bodies are strong bodies, hard at work, straining against the line and the pull of the water at a forty-five-degree angle to the ground, getting drenched by the falling rain. The “trail” the trackers walk is not perceptible as a trail and takes them in and out of the river. The caption, a quotation from the introduction, “*For twenty-three days through snow and rain . . .*,” combines with the image to suggest exhaustion. Some readers may assume, based on of this representation of tracking as grim, brutal, and torturous, that Ells welcomes “the advent of the internal combustion engine along northern rivers;” but this is not the case. Instead, Ells describes the difficulty of tracking in order to glorify it. With the repetitions of the 1913 and 1916 versions of “The Athabaska Trail,” and with repeated evocations of trackers in the book, the tracker becomes *the* figure in *Northland Trails* of an idealized Northern life, and Ells presents the end of tracking labour on the Athabasca as a severe loss.

[IMAGE REMOVED BECAUSE OF COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS]

Figure 6. Page from “The Athabaska Trail (1913)” by S.C. Ells, *Northland Trails*, Burns & MacEachern, p. 38. [This image, which is considered an orphaned work under Canadian copyright law, was removed for online publication. It can be viewed on page 27 in a scanned version of the first edition of *Northland Trails* on the Archive.org website here: https://archive.org/details/northlandtrails00ells/page/26.]

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51 See 7; 13; 25; 80-82; 84; 197; 200.
Although Ells reveals in the introduction to the poem that he has done tracking labour himself (36), he uses a more distant perspective to tell about tracking in “The Athabaska Trail (1913).” The illustrations predominate on the first page of the poem (see Figure 6); they reflect three different perspectives on tracking labour that the poem will move through. The image at the bottom of the page shows the scene of a campsite with a lean-to tent, a fire, and a canoe. A man holds a frying pan over the campfire. He is the first-person speaker who begins the poem, speaking from a nostalgic, post-1916 perspective. The second stanza continues,

Gone are the trackers, coiled are the track-lines,
But still, of a night, as the mist settles down,
I see that long trail winding down to the northland,
And call back the past,—and the men who are gone! (39)

Together, the opening stanzas situate the speaker outside the northland, looking “down” (i.e. downstream, northward) toward it, and remembering “the men who are gone!”—the trackers who no longer work on the Athabasca. This choice of a distant perspective echoes the position assumed by the speaker of Charles G.D. Roberts’s 1883 poem “The Tantramar Revisited,”52 who decides not to “go down to the marsh-land” he remembers:

Yet will I stay my steps and not go down to the marshland,—
Muse and recall far off, rather remember than see,—
Lest on too close sight I miss the darling illusion,
Spy at their task even here the hands of chance and change. (52)

Like Roberts’s speaker, Ells’s speaker would “rather remember than see” a much-changed Athabasca Trail; this preference not to account for the present moment is consistent throughout Northland Trails, made especially potent because Ells fears not only the effects of “chance and change” but also the impacts of his own oil work.

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52 Thanks to Diana Brydon for drawing my attention to the similarities in form and content between “The Tantramar Revisited” and “The Athabaska Trail (1913).”
It is difficult to discern just who the speaker of “The Athabaska Trail (1913)” is. He does not claim to be one of the trackers; neither does he position himself as a tar sands engineer. Such a positioning would be problematic since, as Ells describes in his 1939 “Athabaska Trail” essay, “At the present time, mineral deposits constitute the powerful loadstone which is drawing men northward. To the discovery of these deposits must be attributed the rapid development of transportation facilities throughout the Athabaska-Mackenzie basin” (338). What Ells admits in the essay but does not wish to consider in the poem is that the railway to Fort McMurray was built to ship bitumen. If the father of the tar sands does not wish to be held responsible for the obsolescence of the trackers and the coiling of the track-lines in his poem, he must not be present as an oil sands engineer. The distance Ells creates between his oil work and the poem necessitates a distancing of the speaker from Ells’s insider perspective on tracking. I suggest, however, that the rhythm of the poem conveys an embodied knowledge of tracking labour as well as an energy unconscious that considers the response-ability of the father of the tar sands in relation to the trackers.

I read the rhythm of “The Athabaska Trail (1913)” as an unconscious form through which Ells identifies with the trackers in the poem and reveals his insider experience of tracking labour. The poem is like a work song, written to the remembered cadences of tracking. It moves

53 Joyce e. Hunt draws a direct relationship between the development of the rail lines and the oil sands industry in her exhaustive history Local Push Global Pull. In a letter to S.M. Blair dated 30 June 1928, Karl Clark describes an encounter with Ells: “I saw Ells at the Macdonald [hotel] one day and he came and spilled a line of chatter as per usual. He said he was not doing any paving this year. He could have had lots to do but would not dig sand where he had to barge it to the railway any more. Said that if the government did not extend the railway to McMurray, the tar sands were dead” (Clark 161). According to records of the Treaty 8 negotiations at Fort Chipewyan, however, the extension of the railway was also a demand of the Cree and Chipewyan people of the region (Madill).

54 This poem is also like a dream, one that links two “wishful impulses” through a process of what Sigmund Freud calls condensation: the impulses “do not diminish each other or cancel each other out, but combine to form an intermediate aim, a compromise” (“Unconscious” 186). As Freud describes elsewhere, “in the deep strata of unconscious mental activity contraries are not distinguished from each other but are expressed by the same element” (“Short Account” 205-206). The compromise and the condensation in Ells’s poem, as well as the energy unconscious itself, are glimpsed through the trips or stumbles that I highlight in this poem.
through the stages of the tracker getting started, stumbling, establishing a stride, becoming exhausted, and, at the end of the poem, taking a break and finally catching his breath. The repeated phrase “Drip, drip, and patter, patter” (39) uses heavy punctuation and a disruptive metre to produce drips that I read as trips, or stumbles. The trip that I wish to highlight—the telling moment where “something stumbles” and the unconscious might be glimpsed (Lacan 25)—occurs, however, when the established rhythm is turned on its head in the first line of the second stanza, in which the speaker recalls that the trackers are gone:

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Gone are the trackers, coiled are the track-lines[.] (39)

This is the only line in the opening two stanzas that begins with a stressed syllable. It is a metrical stumble that replaces the rhythm of anapests and iambics with dactyls and trochees. In the system of syllables as steps, it represents both a material stumble (in which the tracker trips) and a response to a staggering realization. Hidden below the knowledge that the trackers are gone is Ells’s knowledge of the role he played in the transition from the fur-trade economy he admires to an industrialized fossil economy; it is this repressed knowledge, encoded in the seemingly excessive emotion and sense of surprise in this stanza, that both trips him up and prevents him from outing himself as both oil sands engineer and tracker.

There is a shift in perspective between the second and third stanzas that parallels a shift from the image of the narrator to the image of Canada geese who fly across the page, linking the nostalgic camper at the bottom to an image of a line of trackers working at the top. The geese predominate in the illustration, with each of their bodies occupying more than ten times as much space as each tiny tracker’s body. These geese are Canada Geese, although Ells mentions only grey geese inside the poem; Ells uses them to assert both a claim to the land on behalf of Canada and a place for himself and his poetry in nature and in the Athabasca region—the geese help the
poem blend in to the natural world represented in the illustration. I have a sense that Ells associates himself with the goose throughout *Northland Trails*. The goose functions as a symbol of the freedom Ells experienced in the North, and of Ells’s identity as a migratory resident and wanderer of the North. It also allows Ells to assume a bird’s-eye perspective that, although it might be fine for a goose, is problematic for a tar sands engineer who avoids more grounded and responsible ways of relating to the land. Like the scale of the geese, the three middle stanzas make up the bulk of “The Athabaska Trail (1913).” In them, the speaker takes a bird’s-eye, third-person view of a pre-1916 scene of tracking labour, narrated in the present tense.

This section contains the prettiest lines in the poem and perhaps in the book, focused on the autumn scenery that surrounds the trackers, who track the scow at the same time of year that Ells and his hired trackers did in 1913:

Drip, drip and patter, patter, the leaves fall clumsily down,
And the willows droop by the river—for the days of summer are gone,
Silent and swift steals the river away, with the woodlands tarnished gold,
For the autumn days are numbered—and the wind is raw and cold.
The morning air is cold and chill, before the rising of the sun,
Through swinging curtains of the mist, the men come toiling, one by one. (39)

The poet uses the seasons as a metaphor: it is autumn both in the natural world and in the employment of the trackers on the Athabasca River. The lines are full of references to clumsiness, weariness, and old age, attributed to leaves, wild hay, willows, the day, geese, and the year, reflecting a tiredness that the trackers, who make their first appearance in the fourth stanza, must ignore in themselves as they carry on, embodying the sturdy, stoic masculinity that Ells celebrates in trackers of the fur-trade era. Observations that “the wind is raw and cold” and

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55 Take, for example, the lines “Fair land of far horizons! land where the grey goose flies!” from “The Challenge” (55) and “North bound the gray geese fly; / Unerring, unafraid, on tireless wing, / To friendly safety of their northern home” from “My Symphony” (47). See pages 39, 95, 103, 168, and 172 of *Northland Trails* for other references to geese.
that the river “steals” north are included as picturesque descriptions of the scenery, but they allow the reader to make inferences about the conditions of the trackers’ toil and the way the river takes their spent energy.

The perspective of these middle stanzas is painterly or cinematic. The speaker compares the orderly trackers with a natural order represented by other rows and lines—of spruce, poplar, and geese. In the lines, “Like silent legions of the north, the endless spruce march by, / Their inky silhouettes clear cut against the evening sky” (39), the speaker looks at the trees as an artist. He imagines drawing “their inky silhouettes,” but the words “clear cut” signal a repressed impulse to extract them in the name of progress. In the closing line of the fifth stanza, “grey geese” form a line that matches the trackers’ and the trees’ lines, “Wearily wing the grey goose south,—the year is growing old” (39), but the 1926, 1938, and 1968 versions of the poem all use “Wearily wings the grey goose south,” individualizing the goose in a way that is in keeping with my sense that for Ells the goose is the self. If the speaker locates himself anywhere in relation to the image of the line of toiling trackers, it is as one who flies over, taking in the scene, aestheticizing and sublimating the trackers’ labour.

Another shift in perspective occurs between the fifth and sixth stanzas: the final stanza, still narrated in the present tense of a moment before 1916, focuses more closely on the trackers, still using the third-person narration of an outsider. The tiny scale of the drawing of the trackers on the first page of the poem is paralleled by the limited amount of detail about their experience, even in this stanza in which the speaker is most attentive to them:

Drip, drip and patter, patter, and it’s chill in the early morn,  
The tracking line grows heavy,—while men trudge wearily on,  
Wet with the dew at night and morn, but with sweat in the noonday sun,  
Oh! there’s warmth,—and rest,—and shelter,—when the last day’s work is done! (39)

56 The Oxford English Dictionary records the first use of the verb clear-cutting to describe forestry practices that remove “every tree in a given area” in 1922 (see “clear”).
The speaker is sympathetic to the trackers in this stanza. He notices the weariness of the trackers and attributes it directly to them, he describes the always-wet conditions they work in, and he notes their long hours, yet he offers few insights into the experience of tracking labour. His use of the “Drip, drip” refrain from earlier stanzas maintains the sense of the larger scene, while also suggesting that this stanza will capture a moment of tracking labour, but these four lines prove inadequate to sum up an entire day, or an entire trip, from the trackers’ perspective, and the cheerfulness at the end of the stanza seems naïve. Aside from the observation that “the tracking line grows heavy,” there are no concrete answers to my questions about how tracking labour feels—which muscles ache? Does the tracker sometimes fall forward onto the ground, or backward when overpowered by the river? What is it like to stand upright after leaning forward so long to pull on the line? What does that kind of weight feel like on the body? On the mind? What would a tracker compare it to? Nowhere in this stanza or in the poem does Ells describe the mechanics or logistics of tracking labour, as he does in a still-limited way in the poetic fragment that closes “The Athabaska Trail (1916).” Even the phrases that Ells uses in his prose, such as “knee deep mud and waist deep water,” “ceaseless torture,” and “myriads of flies from daylight till dark,” are left out of the poetry in favour of clichés that entangle the details of the labourers’ toil and sweat with imagery of raindrops, dew, and sunshine. This contrast reveals the extent to which Ells’s disembodied poetics allowed him to evade the most troublesome contradictions inherent in his work as well as his very presence among the trackers and in the North.

57 The poem fragment from “The Athabaska Trail (1916)” describes tracking in more detail (although still as a seeming outsider):

In budding spring, in summer’s heat and autumn’s whining gale,
Trudged the long lines of toiling men up Athabaska’s trail,
Where foam laced waters reared their crests on ledge and treacherous shoal,
Men guided ponderous lurching craft with sweep and flashing pole[.]. (Ells, Northland Trails 41)
There is significant distance between the aestheticized and idealized representation of tracking in “The Athabaska Trail (1913)” and Ells’s own experience of tracking in 1913, an experience that he refers to in the introduction to the poem:

In the late fall of 1913, the writer and a crew of Breeds and Indians tracked the first important shipment of samples of bituminous sand from McMurray up the rapids and fast water of Athabaska river to Athabaska Landing, a distance of nearly 250 miles. For twenty-three days, from daylight till dark, in snow and rain, the heavily loaded scow was hauled upstream. The following lines reflect, in part, the mental reaction,—a longing for rest—and warmth—and shelter. (36)

Ells refers, uncharacteristically, to his own labour here, albeit somewhat distantly because of his use of third person narration and the passive voice. This is an instance of oil work that he can locate within the system of organic fur-trade-era labour that he romanticizes in Northland Trails, a form of labour that he experienced at the moment of its waning. Perhaps he held the tracker in such high esteem because he had first-hand experience of tracking—but when he celebrates the tracker in his poem, he is not writing about the actual trackers he met and employed in 1913.

The fur-trade-era rivermen who were known as the “Athabasca Brigade” are most often described in historical documents as Métis (McCormack, Fort Chipewyan 54, 62; Athabasca Landing 20, 34), but sometimes as “native” (Blanchet 14) or “Indians and Métis” (Athabasca Landing 25). The skilled Métis and perhaps Chipewyan or Cree pilots who steered scows downriver are the most storied, including one famous Métis pilot, Shot Fousseneuve (Athabasca Landing 25-26; Huberman 28); it appears that tracking labour was less prestigious than the work of the Brigade. In the essay “Athabaska Trail,” Ells refers to rivermen as “an unrivalled race of sturdy men” (“Athabaska Trail” 338). This description is in keeping with the representation of Indigenous people of the Athabasca region as “natural labourers” that Matt Dyce and James Opp note in Charles W. Mathers’s 1901 photographs (71), especially in photographs of trackers on the Athabasca. In this iteration of the noble savage, Indigenous men were considered to be suited
to hard labour. They represented a “productive and civilized” Athabasca region ready to be exploited by urban centres like Edmonton, as well as the nation-state (68). In his introduction to the poem “The Athabaska Trail (1913),” however, Ells racializes the trackers differently. His description of the trackers he hired in 1913 uses the racial slur *Breeds* and the pejorative if commonly used term *Indians* to evoke stereotypes of “bad” or lazy Indigenous men. Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. demonstrates in *The White Man’s Indian* that stereotypes of Indigenous people as the “good Indian,” the “bad Indian” (28), or the “dying Indian” (88) have been used alternately for centuries to serve white interests and power. Ells demonstrates the usefulness of such shifting perceptions of Indigenous people in his representations of trackers, where he oscillates between admiration for Métis voyageurs of old and denigration of the trackers he hired as lazy and shiftless—as “bad” and “dying” in the sense that he sees them as degraded and soon-to-be unemployed versions of the noble savage.

In his *Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands*, Ells describes the trackers as “a dozen natives (only one of whom spoke or understood English)” (9). According to Ells, once the “manilla tracking line was laid out along the shore the tracking crew refused to move” (10). Three times on the journey the trackers had to be threatened and coaxed to continue, and they were prone to injury and illness, propensities Ells blames on them rather than on the hard labour they performed from before dawn until after dark for twenty-three days under his command (10). It was after several of the hired trackers became incapacitated that Ells himself began to help track the heavy scow. The trackers were a disappointment to Ells not because they were Indigenous and did not speak English but because they did not like tracking and were not very good at it. Yet, Ells bolsters his negative assessment of them with racist ideas that were ready to hand, sarcastically calling them “my dusky ‘colleagues’” in his *Recollections* (11), and
expressing in a letter written shortly after the trip his regret that none of the trackers had found “a watery grave” and his hope that they would be arrested “on some count or other before the flowers bloom again” (Letter to Corporal Lanauze). The wish that the trackers had died or that they would be locked away draws on sublimated-but-potent assimilationist and genocidal wishes of Canadian settler colonialism.

In *Northland Trails*, Indigenous men (often Métis men) are represented as labourers. They are either remembered as the courageous and hardy trappers and voyageurs of the past (that is, as natural labourers) or represented as unemployed and inexpert labour at a pivotal moment in the transition between fur trade and mineral economies. In “LaLoche Portage,” Ells compares the heyday of the Portage with the time of writing (sometime before 1936). He describes Indigenous voyageurs of old as “Bowsmen and steersmen—master craftsmen and heroes of unwritten sagas without end” (197). In contrast, “Now only an occasional ragged Breed, followed by his inevitable retinue of wretched starving dogs, slouches silently along” (199). Without the admirable fur-trade vocations of the past, Indigenous men in the nascent carbon nation are represented as suspicious and lazy. In contrast to Ells’s indifferent and disparaging treatment of the Indigenous men he actually met, McCormack describes Métis labourers as “born of, and into, the fur trade mode of production” (“A World” 161), descendants of fur traders with reasonable expectations to have a place within the economic structures of the fur-trade economy. Freighters and rivermen became increasingly unemployed or precariously employed, however, with the advent of sternwheelers on northern Rivers in the 1880s and later rail lines to the North (*Fort Chipewyan* 78; 134-43). Warren Cariou has observed the interplay of ideas about Indigenous

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58 Some of Ells’s trapper characters are Métis (Joe Pelequin in “The Silver Fox” [180-89] and “Big Joe” Leblanc in “Playboy” [160]), but Indigenous men are most often represented doing fur-trade jobs like steering, tracking, and portaging cargo along the Athabasca River (25, 36, 82; 84; 197; 199).
productivity and shiftlessness in moments of transition, such as the transition between the fur trade and the tar sands industry. He writes, “When the bottom falls out of the fur economy, when the oil downturn hits, when the forestry industry retrenches, Indigenous laborers are often among the first to lose their jobs, their status, and perhaps also some of the pride they had gained when it seemed they were welcome in the settler-colonial realm of work” (“Oil Drums” 583). The economic and social relations of the fur trade created both employment for Indigenous men and the conditions, following the decline of the fur trade, under which they had to find another extractive economy to participate in (587). The idea that Indigenous people are unproductive and unemployed contributes to the colonial belief that the land and resources of the North are there for the taking, and that any future employment of Indigenous workers (for example, work in the oil sands) will be an act of corporate benevolence, rather than inadequate compensation for the loss of territory, clean water, healthy living conditions, and traditional ways of life that Indigenous communities near the tar sands (such as the Fort McKay, Athabasca Chipewyan, and Mikisew Cree First Nations) have now long been subject to.

Ells was living, working, and writing at a moment of economic as well as energy transition, when the bottom had fallen out of the fur trade economy and when Ells could observe, seemingly benignly, that Indigenous men did not seem to have much to do. McCormack critiques the “classic narrative of western Canadian history” and the “heroic epics” of the pioneer: they are “[i]mmigrant triumphs built directly on the subjugation and dispossession of Indians and Métis” (Fort Chipewyan 208) and are thus illegitimate and unjust. I would like to hear the trackers’ version of the story alongside Ells’s version; instead, the trackers’ dissent and noncompliance is recorded only as a repressed subtext in Ells’s narratives and his poem. In his study of Duncan

59 See Fort McKay Sustainable Development; Candler et al.
Campbell Scott’s “Height of Land,” Dragland identifies Indigenous “knowledge” or “information” that exists in that poem, despite Scott (252). Don McKay paraphrases Dragland’s argument, using sentences that could just as easily be applied to Ells: “As the poet stands by the portage in the photograph, or sits by the campfire in the poem, he embodies a contradiction pervasive in colonial experience—spiritual acuity and sensitivity to the landscape, coupled with a deafness to the voices already there. He is not really alone. The Indians are not really asleep” (“Great” 6). Although Ells includes the “Breeds and Indians” at best as what Dragland calls “local colour” (252) and at worst as a racist stereotype in his description of tracking labour, they also function as a subversive and critical Indigenous presence in the story.

The trackers Ells hired in 1913 resisted and at turns refused the terms of their employment. The inclusion of this narrative in Ells’s Recollections functions as a critique of the broader narrative of the development of the Athabasca Oil Sands. Even as the story is mediated through Ells’s own perspective as a racist, imperialist civil servant, the trackers’ perspective disagrees with Ells’s description of the journey as the delivery of an “important shipment.” It seems the trackers valued their own welfare over both the bitumen and the forty-five dollars (plus mildewed tobacco and a pair of moccasins) they would be paid for their twenty-three days of labour. (Ells, in contrast, was paid a salary of $1800 per year, and he complains that he paid thirty-eight dollars for the tobacco and moccasins out of pocket [Recollections 11-12]). When the trackers at this moment of energy transition and the death throes of the fur trade economy perform “one of the most brutal forms of labour” as a necessity rather than a vocation, their resistance draws attention to the power dynamics and colonial politics of the scene of their labour. Ells ends his introduction to “The Athabaska Trail (1913)” with a closing sentence to describe “the mental reaction” to arriving at Athabasca Landing. Its phrasing and multiple
dashes ("—a longing for rest—and warmth—and shelter" [36]) are echoed in the closing line of the poem. The dashes that thus frame the poem suggest that much is being left unsaid. They seal off not only Ells’s own mental reaction but also whatever the trackers thought and felt about their work.

In the letter that Ells wrote upon arrival at Athabasca Landing to Corporal Lanauze, the RCMP officer who had hired the trackers for him, Ells complains about the workers. He describes his perspective on the trip from Fort McMurray to Athabasca Landing:

The trip up the river was to me most interesting, though my perspective was somewhat twisted, owing to the fact that I was on the wrong end of the tracking line a good deal of the time. Nevertheless I had ample opportunity for sociological, entomological and numerous other studies. However, if I get started on word-pictures, it will be like

60 Ells calls the man “Corporal Lanauze,” with a different title and a different spelling from the Recollections.
dropping in to see the “Garrison” at the fort for “5 minutes,” so I must hasten to write Finis.

Although Ells would later get a great deal of mileage out of his experience of tracking and this story would become emblematic of the legend of the father of the tar sands, he is correct to write that his perspective of the journey “was somewhat twisted.” Ells was not a tracker, and although he experienced tracking labour he understood neither the language nor the perspective of the trackers. As the employer who hired the trackers to do hard labour and held them to their contract, Ells came from the “wrong end” of the labour arrangement: he belonged riding on the scow or standing on the shore, watching the trackers like the civil servants and officials in Charles Mair’s 1899 photograph of tracking on the Athabasca (see Figure 7). Although Ells threatens that writing all of the “word-pictures” he could about his experience would mean to go on and on like someone who talks too much, my reading of “The Athabaska Trail (1913)” reveals that he does not know as much as he thinks; in fact, he has little of substance to say about even this aspect of his oil labour. Words fail Ells in this poem that takes an outsider’s perspective on tracking labour.

Although Ells unconsciously recorded the cadence and the feeling of doing tracking labour in the rhythm of “The Athabaska Trail (1913),” his conscious mind allowed him to paint only such word-pictures as were permitted by his class, his understanding of what makes good literature, and his repression of the contradictions between his profession and his love for the earth. In addition to the obsolescence of the tracker, this poem mourns Ells’s own obsolescence, as an old-fashioned engineer with a contradictory passion for the North. It also mourns the future effects of his oil work, beginning with its contribution to the arrival of the rail line and extending to the sacrifice zone that industry has made of the Athabasca region today.
Conclusion

Through both a close reading of the poem that touches most directly on Ells’s oil labour and a more distant reading of the trails of modernity and wilderness in *Northland Trails*, I have demonstrated that in his poetry Ells avoided looking closely at his own labour and its implications. This was a way to manage the contradictions between his affection for the land, his vision of modernist progress, and his repressed knowledge of the long-lasting negative impacts industrialization would have on the communities and ecologies of the Athabasca region. Reading for the energy unconscious of *Northland Trails* reveals that the oil sands engineer’s vocation contradicts that of the nature poet: Ells the engineer desired the large-scale industrialization that has scarred and damaged the landscapes that Ells the nature poet loved.
Chapter 2: Rig Talk as Disidentification in Peter Christensen’s *Rig Talk* and Mathew Henderson’s *The Lease*

Peter Christensen’s *Rig Talk* (1981) and Mathew Henderson’s *The Lease* (2012) are poetry collections about oil work published three decades apart. Each poet saw himself as the first Canadian oil worker poet. The fact that Henderson seems not to have read *Rig Talk* before writing *The Lease* makes the similarities between the two collections especially striking: the books are linked in their content and the way the poetry mimics the speech patterns of oil workers. Writing in different moments of energy boom, shock, bust, and transition, each of the poets uses “rig talk” to perform both toxic masculinity and an ecological, feminist, and decolonial proletarian politics. Drawing on the work of Michel Pêcheux and José Esteban Muñoz, I consider these performances as disidentifications with a “toxic identity” (Muñoz 185) and as a strategy for making ideological interpellation work “against itself” (Pêcheux 195). Christensen and Henderson manage the seemingly conflicting identities of oil worker and poet by disidentifying with both. I trace their performances of the talk and the behaviour of workers as petrocultural disidentifications that model ways for oil workers and other petrocultural subjects to account for ourselves as complicit, dependent, and resistant in relation to oil.

Peter Christensen’s *Rig Talk* is the first full poetry collection about oil work published in Canada. Written by an oil worker and published during an oil boom, *Rig Talk* is a collection of poems preoccupied with the rough and knowing talk of oil workers. In Christensen’s tight-lipped lyric poetry, “rig talk” is a tough, working-class vernacular marked by understatement, cussing—as in “*Have a drink / or I’ll shove you out / of the gawdam car*” (50)—and the casual, colloquial language of “*workin’ the rigs*” (32), “*talkin’*” (57), and “*thinkin’ about high skirts / in the city*” (49). Rig talk is also laden with colonial, gender, and ecological violence, a fact that
Christensen’s speaker lays bare, with little commentary or critique except its juxtaposition with the tender talk of a nature poet who mourns the ecological, social, and cultural impacts of extractivism. Dedicated to “the Province of Alberta” and illustrated with black-and-white pencil drawings of workers, animals, and oil rigs by Jacqueline Forrie, *Rig Talk* is a book that, in the words of Thistledown Press’s promotional materials, “presents life as seen by an oil rigger” (“RIG TALK”). It performs versions of rig talk that range from the talk of oil workers to a poetics of the oil industry, provoking questions and offering warnings about what the industry was making of Alberta. At the time of its publication, *Rig Talk* garnered mixed reviews that range between disgust at and admiration of Christensen’s portrayal of a rough masculinity, which some reviewers interpreted as critical and some as an endorsement of the talk and behaviour of oil workers. Christensen responded to the reviews in a 1982 letter to Thistledown editor Glen Sorestad: “Rig Talk seems to be a controversial book. Basically seems the academics don’t understand what the book is about and quickly pass moral judgment on all those heathen folk who dirty their hands.” Today, *Rig Talk* appears to be largely forgotten—the missing origin of a genre that proliferated with a new oil boom in the twenty-first century but that in fact began much earlier.

Of the recent poetry collections about oil work, Mathew Henderson’s 2012 book *The Lease* has received the most critical attention, including a glowing review in *The New York Times* (Garner), an interview with Prairie Public Radio (Melby), and being shortlisted for the Trillium and Gerald Lampert awards for poetry. George Elliott Clarke calls the book a “debonair debut” (*Maple*), and Matthew Tierney describes it as “universally loved” (Tierney and Henderson). *The

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61 For favourable reviews of *Rig Talk*, see Cuelho; Faiers; Moher; O’Brien; O’Conner; Pilon; Tivy; Wayman, “Three Work Poets.” For negative and lukewarm reviews, see Aubert; Daniel; Lane 53-54; McGoogan; Smith; Wiseman; Zacharin; Zichy. For other literary criticism, see New; Ricou 11.
*Lease* is a collection of lyric poems that mimics the talk of workers and also focuses on the interior life of a conflicted production tester. It is often considered to be the first Canadian poetry collection of its kind. Henderson himself says in a talk at Rice University, “for the most part, at least in Canadian poetry, I was walking into an empty space. There hadn’t really been anybody writing about this particular scene” (“Navigating”). In “Canadian Petro-Poetics: Masculinity, Labor, and Environment in Mathew Henderson’s *The Lease*,” a foundational text in the study of both Canadian oil worker poetry and a more broadly defined Canadian “petro-poetics,” Judith Rauscher names only *The Lease* and Dymphny Dronyk’s “The Patch Poems, 2006” as exceptions to the rule that “much of Canadian petro-poetry since the 1970s is written from the viewpoint of a concerned yet distant observer” (101; 109n7). Rauscher describes Henderson’s oil patch poetry in terms that also apply, uncannily, to Christensen’s:

> His poems both construct and subvert an imagined working-class masculinity forged by the hardships of petro-labor and marked by exaggerated misogynist heterosexuality as well as a celebration of technological domination over the land. In the process, the texts explore the possibilities and limits of a proletarian ecopoetics sensitive to patterns of subjection of both land and people. (104)

As Rauscher describes, Henderson’s narrator “[performs] the ruthless oil-fuelled masculinity at the same time that he is criticizing it” (105). Like Christensen, Henderson uses insider language and colloquial speech to recycle and subvert a toughened and toxic masculinity. Unlike Christensen, he uses such speech in confessional, lyric narrative poems that use work poetry and vernacular portraits of oil workers and machines to consider the emotional life and the responsibilities of the oil worker.

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62 Sally Cole writes for a local Prince Edward Island newspaper that Henderson “is quickly becoming known as Canada’s poet of the oil patch.” In a review of Garth Martens’s *Prologue for the Age of Consequence*, rob mclennan writes, “this is not the first poetry collection about the Alberta oil fields, after Toronto poet Mathew Henderson’s *The Lease* (2012) addressed the same phenomenon and was shortlisted for both the [Trillium] Book Award for Poetry and the Gerald Lampert Award.”

63 See my discussion of Dymphny Dronyk’s *Contrary Infatuations* (which includes “The Patch Poems, 2006”) in chapter 3.
Disidentification in *Rig Talk* and *The Lease*

Both Christensen and Henderson perform rig talk, or talking like an oil worker, in a mode that I describe as *disidentification*, following Pêcheux’s theorization of disidentification and Muñoz’s theorization of disidentifying performativity. Pêcheux first used the term *disidentification* in *Language, Semantics and Ideology* (1975; English edition 1982), in which he lays the linguistic and philosophical groundwork for a “materialist theory of discourse” (60) and a theory of “ideological class struggle” after Louis Althusser (215). In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser writes that “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (74). Althusser demonstrates that ideology is both material and discursive: it reproduces the subject’s unconscious “submission to the rules of the established order” (63) through interpellation and through the seemingly free actions of the individual. Althusser writes, “the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he [sic] shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection ‘all by himself’” (82). In different terms, ideology is performative: it must constantly be reproduced through the interpellation and the consent of subjects.

Pêcheux reminds readers that “ideologies are not made up of ‘ideas’ but of practices” (98). He demonstrates that reproduction happens both through the seamless identification of the “good subject,” who accepts and embodies the discursive formations of dominant ideology, and through the outright refusal of the “bad subject,” who “counteridentifies with the discursive formation imposed on him [sic]” (157). Pêcheux posits “disidentification” as a transformative third modality (158). In Muñoz’s summary of Pêcheux’s concept, “[d]isidentification is the third mode
of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (11). As Pêcheux demonstrates, ideological interpellation links “the constitution of meaning” and “the constitution of the subject” (105); disidentification must, therefore, be “a non-subjective position” (158), since it refuses the subject positions on offer. A disidentificatory position or performance must, then, also be experimental and transformative, working in an “epistemological break” where meaning has broken down (136), turning ideology “against itself” (195), and producing the grounds for a resistant politics (for Pêcheux, a proletarian politics [150]).

Muñoz elaborates a theory of disidentificatory performativity in Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (1999). For Muñoz, “Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). As Muñoz demonstrates through his discussion of disidentifications like Vaginal Davis’s “terrorist drag” performance of masculine white supremacy (108) or Pedro Zamora’s queer, Latinx, and HIV-positive “counterpublicity” on an early reality TV show (147), disidentification can look like complicity, parody, or mimicry of normative or majoritarian ways of being (for example, the idea that “men are like this, Latinas are like that, queers are that way” [6]), but it is also resistant. Following Diana Fuss, an interplay of desire and identification—of “wanting the other and wanting to be the other” is key to Muñoz’s queer theory of disidentification (14). Disidentification is critical ambivalence that always involves “negotiations between desire, identification, and ideology” (Muñoz 15). Muñoz is interested in disidentification as worldmaking or perhaps as poetics—as “performative acts of
conjuring that deform and re-form the world” (196). He argues that disidentification can be a basis for solidarity: “Counterpublics are not magically and automatically realized through disidentifications, but they are suggested, rehearsed, and articulated” (179). As Judith Butler writes in her assessment of Muñoz’s work, “We don’t need to identify with one another, but we need to converge at the site of our disidentification” (“Solidarity” 18)—that is, disidentification suggests modes of solidarity for a post-identity politics.64

Both Christensen and Henderson have been accused of mere complicity. For example, Francis Zichy notes an unresolved “tension between wonder and dismay” in Rig Talk (see also Smith; Sheppy). For Zichy, this is a weakness of Christensen’s poetics, but I consider it as a strategic positioning, a disidentifying performativity that holds wonder and dismay in tension. As a white, cisgender, settler scholar writing about poetry authored by white, cisgender, settler men, however, I am wary of appropriating Muñoz’s theory, which he elucidates in relation to the performances and performativity of queer people of colour. As Muñoz notes, “Disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence” (161), and I am aware that Christensen’s and Henderson’s racial, educational, colonial, and sex/gender positions of privilege have shielded them (as my own positioning has shielded me) from the full force of the combined effects of capitalist-heterosexual-white supremacist-patriarchal oppression. In particular, despite Muñoz’s resistance to the term masculinity, which he argues “is, among other things, a cultural imperative to enact a mode of ‘manliness’ that is calibrated to shut down queer possibilities and energies” and tends to do so even in work that tries to subvert it (58), the

64 Here, Judith Butler also draws on her earlier writing about disidentification in Bodies that Matter (which Muñoz cites [12]). In relation to “women” as a discursive category and ground for feminist solidarity, and in response to Slavoj Žižek, Butler asks, “What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong? And how are we to interpret this disidentification produced by and through the very signifier that holds out the promise of solidarity?” (219).
disidentificatory performances that I highlight in the poetry collections are often performances of toxic masculinity. Such performances occur, furthermore, as part of the unrepentant masculinism of Christensen’s poetics, and the ambivalent masculinism of Henderson’s. Despite my wariness, and with openness to responses to or critiques of my work, I note that there is a particular resonance between these poets’ engagements with the ideological interpellation of the oil worker and disidentification, as theorized by both Pêcheux and Muñoz.

In a discussion of the *chusmería*—the “loudness and deliberate tackiness” (193)—of Carmelita Tropicana [Alina Troyana]’s *Chicas 2000*, Muñoz writes,

> Disidentification is a mode of performance whereby a toxic identity is remade and infiltrated by subjects who have been hailed by such identity categories but have not been able to own such a label. Disidentification is therefore about the management of an identity that has been “spoiled” in the majoritarian public sphere. (185)

I consider the subject position of the oil worker to be such a “toxic identity” and a provocation for disidentification. Oil workers play a vital-but-sublimated role in “petromodernity” (LeMenager 67) that U.S. historian Bob Johnson locates in the physical and imaginary space he calls “modernity’s basement” (*Carbon* xv). In modernity’s basement, a place removed from public view and the national imaginary, fossil fuels are not only a source of modern ease and progress. Although fossil fuels have been incredibly profitable for the upper echelons of the oil industry and liberating for middle-class subjects, for those who do the work of extraction and production, they are “disabling, constraining, and even atavistic” (xx). In both petromodern and ecological ideology, working-class subjects are interpellated to embody toxic identities (for example, the colonial masculinity of a stereotypical roughneck), in part so that they can be held responsible, unfairly, for the extractive relations of petromodernity, and left to suffer “the material and physical violence in modernity’s basement” (145). For Christensen and Henderson, this toxic identity most often takes the form of a toxic masculinity that matches the exploitation
of the land with the exploitation and violation of women. Yet, homophobia and queer desire also factor into oil workers’ disidentificatory performances of hypermasculinity. The interplay of desire and identification is evident both in Christensen’s poem “Heroes,” where a younger brother who once admired roughnecks now embodies the romanticized role himself (47), and in Henderson’s “Penthouse Letters,” where the workers become unusually aware that their homophobic “ass-grabbing” can also be a sign of their desire for one another (45). Being an oil worker, passing as an oil worker, and writing about having been an oil worker are all practices of identification/disidentification and desire. Along with their fellow workers, Christensen’s and Henderson’s speakers work on and against the subjectivity of the oil worker—which is always, as Althusser notes, the ground of their seeming freedom and their subjection (82).

I contend that oil worker poets’ disidentificatory desires are also utopian desires for the transformation of the relations of petromodern production. Occupying a subject position inside “modernity’s basement” fosters an organic or intuitive theory—what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls a “poor theory” (1)—of disidentification: through an epistemological break, the oil worker sees the hypocrisies of petromodern class, gender, and ecological relations and rejects delineations of “good” and “bad” subjects, as well as positions of absolute innocence or guilt. Refusing to occupy fully the ideological subject position of either the oil worker or the ecopoet, these oil worker poets use disidentification to work on the ideologies that interpellate them. They innovate an ambivalent theory and poetics of petrocultural disidentification that puts ideology to work “against itself” (Pêcheux 195) and creates new material and conceptual ground for solidarity.
**Rig Talk by Peter Christensen**

Peter Christensen was born and raised in rural Alberta. A lifelong worker and writer of work poetry, he did a variety of jobs, including working on an oil rig, before he became a long-time mountain guide and park ranger. Christensen studied creative writing at the University of Lethbridge and helped found the literary journal *Canada Goose* in the 1970s. *Rig Talk* is Christensen’s second full poetry collection. Mark Cochrane describes Christensen’s writing style as “characterized by a tough imagism—clipped lines, flat observation, stark visuality” (206).

Looking at *Rig Talk*, the lines do literally seem clipped, pared down to the bare minimum of action and sometimes dialogue, as if the poems were erasure poems with words and phrases deleted or cut out, or collage-poems made of words extracted from longer narratives. Some poems, like “The Oil Rush Has Come” (9), “Inside” (35) and “Heroes” (47), read as truncated or censored sonnets. In all of his poetry, Christensen cultivates a blunt-yet-enigmatic poetics, which W.H. New calls “stubbornly, insistently, affirmatively male” (118). If the oil-worker speaker of Christensen’s poetry does not say much, it is hard to tell whether that is an attribute of the worker or of the poet who prefers to say as little as possible, in the smallest possible number of words. The ambivalence of Christensen’s performance of the voice of an oil worker is, in part, produced through the difficulty of distinguishing between Christensen’s usual poetic voice and the voice that is meant to be taken as “rig talk.” Christensen’s deadpan delivery of minimalist poems and imagery leaves many of the poems open to being read in multiple ways—as admiring of oil workers and their behaviour, as critical, as ironic, as metaphors, or as meaning nothing more than what the speaker says.

*Rig Talk* was written during the years that David Harvey has identified, retrospectively, as a global neoliberal revolution, shaped through Deng Xiaoping’s liberalization of the Chinese
economy beginning in 1978 and the elections of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in 1980 (1). It is also a product of the era of the oil boom and shocks of the 1970s, published during the brief regime of the National Energy Program (NEP) in Canada before the “glut” of 1982, the defeat of Pierre Elliott Trudeau’s Liberal government and scrapping of the NEP in 1984, and the “bust” of 1986 (see Bregha; Eaton, “1980s”; Hershey). As Matthew Huber argues, the oil shocks of the 1970s led to the entrenchment of neoliberalism in the United States, as private citizens asserted their desire to be left alone by both Big Oil and Big Government, whom they blamed for the scarcity of oil (Lifeblood). Although Steve Penfold notes that the Canadian government’s regulation of oil prices inside Canada meant that “Canadian consumers were surprisingly unconcerned” about oil prices in the 1970s (278), the response of the oil industry and western Canadians to government regulation and the NEP brought about a similar, if delayed, shift toward neoliberalism in Canada. Recent exposés by Inside Climate News have revealed that the 1970s and 1980s were also the era when oil companies Exxon and Shell were funding research on climate change (then known as “the greenhouse effect”) and already knew it was caused by the combustion of fossil fuels. In an example of the elitist class politics of neoliberal ideology (Harvey 19), which promises freedom to everyone, but especially to the market and the wealthy, Big Oil would shift by the end of the 1980s to funding misinformation and climate denial in the face of growing popular knowledge about climate change (see Banerjee, Song, and Hasemyer; Cushman; Greenpeace; Hall). Although Christensen likely did

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65 Jodi Dean defines neoliberalism:

Most generally, neoliberalism is a philosophy viewing market exchange as a guide for all human action. Redefining social and ethical life in accordance with economic criteria and expectations, neoliberalism holds that human freedom is best achieved through the operation of markets. Freedom (rather than justice or equality) is the fundamental political value. (51)

David Harvey notes that neoliberalism can be seen as both a “utopian project” (related to freedom) and a “political project” (a class project of the “economic elite”), but in practice the utopian side only serves to justify neoliberalism’s elitist politics (19). Therefore, neoliberalism can also be defined as “the momentous shift towards greater social inequality and the restoration of economic power to the upper class” (26).
not know about climate change, the imminent bust, the long-term impacts of neoliberal ideology, or the coming crisis of abandoned and orphaned oil wells in western Canada.\(^6\) \textit{Rig Talk} suspects, foreshadows, and fears such events will result from the hubristic actions the speaker observes and ambivalently participates in through his oil work.

\textit{Rig Talk} is divided into three sections. The poems in the first section, “Oil Rush,” are documentary poetry about oil work and other extraction work (such as driving a gravel truck) amid the oil boom of the 1970s. This section has a loose narrative arc that begins with a new worker going “Up North,” “like a man” (10), and that ends with the deadly and fiery outcomes after a blowout. The objects that surround the worker (geogell charges, oil platforms and derricks, trucks, tools, pipe, engines, steel) materialize for the reader through the language and vocabulary of the oil worker, as well as through experiments in concrete poetry where the poem is an oil well or an oil rig (see “Drilling” [16]; “The Driller Makes a Mistake” [26-27]).\(^6\) The workers and their jobs—driver, jughound, powder monkey, roughneck, driller—also materialize in this section, as does their talk, which comes not so often in quotations as through the speaker himself, talking like an oil worker. Finally, fear—the fear of injury, of explosion, of sour gas, and of “the bush” itself [17]—registers as a repressed working condition. Fear is a synonym for a worker’s job, as in the line “I work the morning fear” (23), where managing fear—being afraid and “Keeping Fear Away” (18)—is what an oil worker does. In the last poem of the section, “Elegy for a Rig Worker,” the speaker observes, “what I learned from workin the rigs / is that I am an expendable machine” (32). He links his toil with the wasteful habits of consumers, showing that it is not only the oil companies that exploit him.

\(^6\) In 2018, twenty percent of all wells in BC, Alberta, and Saskatchewan were inactive, uncapped, and unremediated (Lewis et al. W2).

\(^6\) Dymphny Dronyk uses a similar, simple concrete form throughout her “Patch Poems” in \textit{Contrary Infatuations}. See my reading of Dronyk’s poetry as concrete oil-well poems on page 166.
The second section, “A River Begins Here,” is a suite of ecopoems focused on the natural world and the worker’s relationship with it—as a site of both work and recreation, as a victim of pollution and ecocide, and as a voice of critique against extractivism. The tone of the nature poems is mournful, and many of the poems feature rivers that are polluted, dammed, and otherwise changed. “River Dance” recalls “the last dance” of the Bighorn Stoney on their territory before it is flooded in 1972 by the Bighorn Dam and the politicians who “raise themselves over the earth” and make a “dead river” (38); the nature poems also function as critiques of settler colonialism. In “Slave,” the Slave River voices its disgust—“I have cleaned your toilets for years / have the dettol and arsenic of sanitation in me” (39)—linking the oil worker’s naming of his treatment as an “expendable machine” by the oil industry (32) with an awareness that nature, too, is turned into an “energy slave” through the non-reciprocal relations of extraction and the dumping of toxic materials (Fuller; Nikiforuk, *Energy*). Like the Dene people after whom the Slave River is named, who are not correctly described as slaves, the servitude of the river and the oil worker are misrecognitions and misnomers. The poem “End of the Chain” makes a similar link with the servitude of non-human animals. In it, a wolf pup the workers have chained up in their camp is terrorized at night by another wolf (42-43). Jacqueline Forrie’s drawing of the pup shows the picture exceeding its seeming frame (see Figure 8), and the chain crosses over a line that may be a river, drawn to a different scale than the wolf. Together, the poem and the image suggest a scale-shifting reading that links the chaining of the

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68 See my reading of the metaphor of the energy slave (first coined by Buckminster Fuller in the 1940s and recently popularized through Andrew Nikiforuk’s book *The Energy of Slaves*) in Lesley Battler’s *Endangered Hydrocarbons* and Naden Parkin’s *A Relationship with Truth* in chapter 4.

69 The naming of people as Slavey (as well as the naming of the Slave River and the two Slave Lakes) comes from the colonial adoption of Cree pejoratives used to refer to the Indigenous peoples who live in the region (see Asch 348).
pup with large-scale destruction wreaked through oil extraction, as well as the exploitation of oil workers.

Figure 8. “End of the Chain” illustration by Jacqueline Forrie. Rig Talk by Peter Christensen, Thistledown, 1981, p. 45. Used with permission.

The final section of the book, entitled “Rig Talk,” is the section most clearly focused on talk. In it, the speaker puts on the voices of oil workers off the job and of other residents of the oil patch in a series of vernacular poems, spoken in voices ranging from an oil worker’s admiring younger brother (47) to a fast-talking auctioneer (63). Many of the poems in this section seem to
be unrelated to oil work but serve as allegories and critiques of the oil industry and of extractivism. The speaker of “The Ride,” who hitches a ride in a “carload of drunks” and can find no way to get out except to drink along with them and condone the physical and verbal abuse of the woman driver (50), is like an oil worker along for the ride, only going along with behaviour he abhors to make a living. In “Defense,” an oil worker beats his wife and the man he caught in bed with her until the man “squeal[s]” (62), his cries echoing the “S Q U E A L” of a hunted rabbit that stands in for the oil worker’s repressed fear in the “Oil Rush” section (17); the oil worker uses familiar idioms of pain and fear to assert ownership and power over his wife. The penned horses up for sale and the old horses sent “to the glue dog god” in the entertaining poem “Horse Auction” (63) parallel the indignity of oil work and the fear of what will happen when a worker grows too old or injured for the job.

At first reading, the middle section of Rig Talk seems out of place. Indeed, as Lorne Daniel remarks, the poems in that section “do not, strictly speaking, fit the thematic structure of the book,” and several reviewers comment on the way the poems in “A River Begins Here” stand out or function as a reprieve from “the hard oil rig poems” (Pilon 153; see also Moher; Smith 17). Yet, the ecopoems are an important site of juxtaposition and critique that is integral to the poetics and politics of Rig Talk. In the “A River Begins Here” section, an extraction worker who has dug into the untouchables of Mother Earth to pay his bills also kneels down to kiss her. Like looking up at “tin-skinned jets / burdened with commerce” in the “reptillian skies [sic]” above a once-wild place where a river begins (37), the effect of the nature poems is incongruous.

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70 Perhaps to make the book more marketable, Christensen and Thistledown editor Byrna Barclay separated Rig Talk into three sections, making oil work bookend the collection. Christensen’s original manuscript was divided into two sections, “Rig Talk” (made up of documentary work poems) and “A River Begins Here” (combining nature poems, vernacular poems, and philosophical poems). The original manuscript is held in the Thistledown fonds at the University of Manitoba Archives (MSS 116 [A.90-64]), box 16, folder 2.
disorienting, and sad. As the book’s structure reinforces, these poems and the feelings they provoke are central to *Rig Talk*, linking the oil industry to polluted, dead rivers and the servitude of the oil worker to nature at the end of the chain.

I argue in chapter 1 that oil work and nature poetry are irreconcilable in tar sands engineer S.C. Ells’s poetics, and that knowledge about Ells’s work and its effects on the Athabasca region is repressed in *Northland Trails* (1938; 1956). In comparison, Christensen’s disjointed inclusion of oil work poetry and ecopoetry in the same collection advances the theory and practice of Canadian petropoetics. When comparing *Rig Talk* to twenty-first century oil worker poetry collections, Christensen’s poetry may appear, like Ells’s, to avoid considering the oil worker’s responsibility for ecological and social harm. Whereas, for example, Dymphny Dronyk’s speaker in *Contrary Infatuations* (2007) is concerned with showing that opponents of the oil industry are just as implicated as she is, and Naden Parkin’s speaker in *A Relationship with Truth* (2014) is wracked by his extractive relationship with the earth, as well as the class position that keeps him working in the oil industry, Christensen’s speaker can seem, in contrast, not to feel guilty enough. I contend, however, that this seeming lack is produced by Christensen’s refusal of neoliberal ideology that privatizes responsibility. The neoliberal valuation of freedom of the market and freedom of the individual was ascendant when he wrote *Rig Talk* but is dominant (and therefore seemingly natural and true) today. Neoliberalism distracts attention from the unequal and exploitative power structures of globalized economies through the idea, as Huber summarizes, that “what matters most are your individual life choices” (*Lifeblood* 160). *Rig Talk* pushes back at the way freedom can be used, for example, to reduce class power and privilege to “life choices” and to burden workers with too much responsibility while absolving others. It is

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71 See chapter 3 on Dymphny Dronyk’s *Contrary Infatuations*; chapter 4 on Naden Parkin’s *A Relationship with Truth*. 
only in a literal sense that oil workers have dirtier hands than other petromodern subjects or than the white-collar oil executives who employ them. Poems like “Elegy for a Rig Worker” (32) and “Everything Must Be New” (61) reveal Christensen’s sense that responsibility is widely shared. In his poetry, individual oil workers do bear responsibility for their actions (including actions like drunk driving, assault, and lighting a cigarette on an oil rig), as well as collective actions such as the town in “Sewer Trout” dumping sewage into the river (40), but their responsibility for ecological harm is kept in proportion to the amount of power they actually hold and the relatively small scale of their individual actions, not used to obscure the responsibilities of corporate and state forces beyond their control. Not being overcome with guilt means that Christensen’s speaker can take ambivalent and resistant positions in relation to settler colonialism and the oil industry. Christensen’s disidentification with emergent neoliberal ideology is instructive because it points to a theory and practice of petrocultural disidentification for those of us who struggle to perceive and resist naturalized and dominant neoliberal ideology.

Christensen opens Rig Talk with an untitled poem that precedes the three sections, in which he introduces three central disidentifications. The speaker/poet visits “Cactus Rig 17” and the driller assumes he is looking for work:

At Cactus Rig 17
I climb a ladder
to the doghouse
The driller meets me
at the door:
There’s no jobs here

So I tell him I’m writing
a book about rigs

Well it’s about gawdam time
somebody wrote about us

He hands me a hard hat
gives me a tour
of the drilling platform
talks about roughnecks
who come and go
of lifelines
snapped in the steel[.] (7)

The speaker is a poet and also a former oil worker, comfortable wearing a hard hat and climbing up into the doghouse. He says the book he is writing is about “rigs,” but the driller understands that it is about oil workers. The driller’s response that “it’s about gawdam time / somebody wrote about us,” rendered in italics to figure the voice of the driller breaking through the narration of the speaker, makes the driller’s speech poetry, and the driller a poet. It also equates rigs and oil workers, figuring the rig the two men stand on as also a poet and an agent capable of snapping lifelines. It suggests a range of disidentificatory relationships between oil workers and the rig, where workers climb and work on the structure, where they and the rig can be substituted for one another, and where the “lifelines / snapped in the steel” (7) can be the bodies and spirits of oil workers, either literally or figuratively broken on the structure of the rig, but can also refer to intimacy or entanglement, including being “snapped in” to the rig with a safety harness. Also “snapped in[to] the steel” are the power structures of the oil industry and petromodernity that the rig animates, the livelihoods and safety of the workers who work on its drilling platform and up in the derrick, and the life of the earth channelled and drawn to the surface through its workings. These lines also foreshadow the snapping steel of a burning and buckling drilling tower later in the book.

In this poem, Christensen establishes patterns of disidentifying rig talk that he will use throughout the book. He uses what Muñoz calls “tactical misrecognition” to resist interpellation. Muñoz gives an example from Manuel Puig’s Kiss of the Spider Woman: “Valentin commands his gay cell mate to ‘Be a man!’ Molina, a seasoned loca, responds to his command by
exclaiming: ‘A man! Where do you see a man!’” (168). Christensen’s poem seems to ask, similarly, “Where do you see a poet?” “Where do you see an oil worker?” and “Who speaks rig talk?” He uses tactical misrecognition in this opening poem to foster and express solidarity with workers, Indigenous people, and the land, even as he resists fully identifying with any of the available subject positions (either oil worker, poet, or rig). In the analysis that follows, to tease out a poetics of disidentification in Rig Talk, I trace three threads of rig talk as disidentificatory performance: as the talk of the ecopoet, as the talk of oil workers, and as “land speaking” through the talking rig (Armstrong).

The speaker of most of the poems in Rig Talk is a persona of Peter Christensen, the person “writing / a book about rigs” who was once an oil worker and who looks like one to the driller. He also talks like one, when he is not talking like a poet. According to Wayman’s delineations of insider and outsider work poetry (Inside 11), Christensen is an insider because he has worked as an oil rigger and can represent the work based on personal experience. Despite this, in Rig Talk, Christensen manages conflicting desires to be seen as one of the workers and to set himself apart as a poet and artist. In more than a handful of terse lyrics, clustered in the “A River Begins Here” section and scattered throughout the book, the main speaker of Rig Talk speaks as a poet, and, sometimes stereotypically, like a poet. Christensen’s lyric ecopoetry can be distinguished from his work poems by the way it focuses on landscape, visual imagery, and the thoughts of the poet himself. These poems speak in the more polished, formal, and grammatically correct voice of the poet. In addition to the documentary work poems and vernacular poems that allow him to talk like an oil worker, Christensen also performs disidentification with oil work through the form of the prairie lyric, a poetic form he finds both irresistible and detestable because he sees it as inherently settler colonial. It is in such poems that he practices an ambivalent ecopoetics that
looks for modes of “dwelling with the earth” (Bate 42), working with and against settler colonial land politics and poetics.

Christensen’s lyrics are not effusive or flowery, but they do contain some of the most memorable images and lines in the book, including the couplet “The plains are alive / with the campfires of millionaires” that embeds a class analysis in an image of gas flares dotting the plains. That couplet ends the poem “The Oil Rush Has Come,” which describes the changing landscape in Alberta and mourns the end of a particular settler-colonial way of life. The poet expresses regret at the demise of one-room schoolhouses and wood stoves, and the way that “All the little Europes have disappeared” (9), referring to the ethnically and culturally distinct patterns of early settlement in Alberta that followed the genocidal clearing of Indigenous peoples from the plains (see Daschuk). Instead, now, “The back country is cutlined / marked square / drilled pipelined” (9) and lit by gas flares. “The Oil Rush Has Come” is spoken from the perspective of a settler Canadian, with little concern for what the land was before it was “the little Europes.” Yet, Christensen also disidentifies with settler-colonial ideology in other poems like “We Are New Here” (15), “River Dance” (38), and “Slave” (39). In “But That’s History,” the speaker characterizes his own his mansplaining and whitesplaining of history to “one of Sitting Bull’s great-granddaughters” in a beer parlour as “[getting] so drunk on the same old shit”—as sexism, racism, cultural genocide, and his own false sense of superiority (56).

Through disidentificatory ecopoetry, Christensen’s settler-poet speaker works on and against his own ongoing interpellation by settler-colonial ideology. He is aware that his oil work, his ecopoetics, and his very presence on the land embody toxic ideologies that are working on and through him while he works on them. The title of the poem “Inside” contrasts the nature-loving side of the speaker (his inside) with the alienating work that he does, but the speaker’s
disidentification exposes his complicity as hypocrisy. The speaker who says (inside) “I do not interfere with / the lives of small birds” (35) is the same person who blows up ravens, trees, and rocks as a way of “Keeping Fear Away” (18). The speaker of “Lorna’s Bones” critiques and participates in the way prairie poetry, for example Saskatchewan poet Lorna Crozier’s poetry, overwrites the territory and the meaning of the prairies: “When I get up in the morning / your sun already coming over the horizon / shines in my window / owns everything” (58). Christensen exposes the colonialism that can be enacted and legitimated through poetry: the prairie poets’ identification with the prairie covers over earlier land relations and makes settler-colonial claims to own the land. Yet, he uses his own masculinist “talk,” problematically, to overwrite the “talk talk talk” of a woman poet (58). In the mini-sonnet “Everything Must Be New,” the ecopoet lists things—“cars lamps houses” but also “culture”—that must be new under commodity capitalism. Christensen ends the poem with a couplet: “I do not forget / my place among things” (61). The “I” who speaks these lines speaks from the unique disidentificatory perspective of a poet who is also an oil worker—a producer and consumer of commodities who understands their ecological and social costs, a worker treated like a mere thing by the millionaires who own the means of production and appropriate his labour, and a white, male settler attempting to draw attention to power structures in which he is implicated.

In documentary poetry about oil work, Christensen speaks in an autobiographical oil-worker voice. Although Christensen’s choice of first- or second-person narration for these poems seems haphazard, “Up North” is a poem narrated in a second person voice that appropriately

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72 The reference to Crozier in the title may be a jab at Crozier’s life partner, Patrick Lane, who refused to edit *Rig Talk* for Thistledown and who would later opine, in his article on “The Saskatchewan Presses” for *Grain*, that Christensen’s book “should not have been published at all” and that “[t]he quality of the poetry is extremely marginal” (54). It was after Lane declined to edit his book that Christensen changed the title of this poem from “Poem to Remind Me” to “Lorna’s Bones” (see the original and working manuscripts for *Rig Talk* in the Thistledown Press fonds at the University of Manitoba Archives, MSS 116 [A.90-64], box 16).

73 “Everything Must Be New” is half the length of a sonnet, with lines half the length of pentameter.
echoes Althusser’s formulation of the police officer who hails subjects by saying, “Hey, you there!” (79). It figures the movement of young men toward the frontiers of resource extraction as their interpellation by settler-colonial modernizing ideology, interpellating them to make something of themselves by going “up north / to make boys into men” (10). “You” go along, just one of the men “[crammed] into the camper” (10) who “drift” and doze through the trip (11). This is the first of a series of poems focused on upward motion as progress. The next poem, “Gravel Trucks Arrive at the Pit,” begins,

    Lights sway out of the fog and dust
    First sun
    hits the glistening HOUGH loader

    Trucks buck
    under each dump

    Gravel spills across the cab
    and I pull first and second gear
    in the spicer

    UP

    the steep walls of the pit[.] (12)

Coming after “Up North,” where the word up appears three times in the final stanza alone, the internal rhymes and assonances with up are relentless in this poem, beginning with dust, sun, HOUGH [pronounced huff], trucks, buck, under, and dump, and emphasized through the emphatic, uppercase instance of UP. Although extraction work inevitably involves movement both up and down (including when the tired worker must “SLEEP DEAD” before getting up again tomorrow [12]), poems like this one demonstrate how talk about extraction and extractive workers focuses on progress, on the pay, and on upward mobility. In reality, it is only capital that flows relentlessly upward, appropriating cheap nature, work, and lives in the service of oil executives and investors (Patel and Moore). “We Are New Here” is also an up (down) poem that
critiques settler colonial and capitalist alienation from the land. Mountains are things settlers and extractors “look up” at while violating their feminized bodies: “we dig / into the untouchables” to extract coal and barite to take “down // to the sea” and “down // to the prairie[,]” not stopping “until the mountains / are empty” (15). The phrase “We Are New Here” is offered as an explanation—or perhaps an excuse—for how a settler-colonial we that includes the workers but also oil consumers can perpetrate such violence on the land; it suggests that “we” do not know the customs for how to live well on this land. The explosions in “The Driller Makes a Mistake” (26-27) and “Wild Fire” (31), where sour gas, fire, and the rig itself come crashing down, serve as an abrupt end to the talk of oil work as upward mobility. This series of poems moves from showing subjects blindly going along with ideological interpellation to the epistemological break where the ideology and their work become meaningless (where the worker or the oil market crashes or the rig goes up in flames), and eventually to disidentification with settler-colonial ideology through admitting that “we” do not know how to live here and through looking for another way of living.

In addition to documentary poems about work, Christensen also performs the talk of oil workers through a second model of the rig-talking poem: postmodern “vernacular” poetry of the type Dennis Cooley would soon celebrate in The Vernacular Muse (1987). In his vernacular poems, Christensen uses a different kind of disidentifying performance to put on voices that are clearly—or sometimes unclearly—not his own. While other workers’ speech is signalled inside some of Christensen’s poems through the italicization of the talk, for example, of a drunk driver or a driller, it is not clearly signalled when a full poem is spoken in the voice of one of Christensen’s oil-patch characters. Christensen leaves it to readers to identify the different voices of the vernacular poems, such as the fisherman in “Sewer Trout” who says
I used to go fishin' in the river til the town council and good gov’t decided to clean up this place and started everybody shittin' in the river (40)

or the man who beats up his wife’s lover in “Defense,” who

Couldn’t get him
to squeal
just right

ya know[.] (62)

Vernacular poems in *Rig Talk* are often disidentificatory and parodic (but seldom funny) performances of masculinism. The oil workers’ talk is riddled with misogyny, racism, and homophobia, while at moments also seeming to articulate a proletarian, ecofeminist poetics and politics. These poems are narrated in the first person, often as a form of direct address to a “you,” and they complicate the reader’s interpretation of both the “I” and the “you” used by the speaker in other poems. It becomes unclear who is speaking or whose perspective is being privileged. Is it Christensen or some other oil worker who might be shirking responsibility for getting a fourteen-year-old girl pregnant in “Shotgun” (57), or who commits the violent act in “Defense,” or who calls his wife, his truck, and the earth “THE OLD LADY” in “Going Home” (48)? I argue that the confusion is intentional and is characteristic of disidentifying performativity in *Rig Talk*. Christensen’s sympathetic-parodic performances of the speech of other oil workers is a form of disidentification that is neither an endorsement nor a condemnation. By avoiding judging oil workers—even for seemingly unforgivable offenses—Christensen resists both “good” and “bad” subject positions and as a result opens himself up to being judged as too sympathetic to oil workers. He also provokes his readers to disidentify rather than either identifying or counteridentifying with oil workers.
The poem titled “Rig Talk,” which closes the collection, addresses the relationship between the talk of the main speaker and of the other oil workers. I quote it in its entirety here:

I wonder at the power
of the men
    I work for
They make me
rough like their talk

I laugh with them
when they say
they are not afraid
of women
    sex
    manhood
    ANYBODY (67)

Douglas Smith refers to this poem when contemplating Christensen’s relationship to the “moronic behaviour of the workers” in another poem: “Granted, Christensen has, as he says, been made rough by these men, but his roughness comes closer here and elsewhere to acquiescence” (17). In “Rig Talk,” the speaker seems to acquiesce to the tough masculinity of the workers, which he both admires and questions. He seems to participate in a version of rig talk that also functions as the big talk of those who lord power over others, or of those who pretend to be more powerful than they really are (like the politicians who “raise themselves over the earth” in “River Dance” [38]), but Christensen’s disidentification with the big talk of toxic masculinity and extractive coloniality is also subversive.

The poem “Rig Talk” begins with the speaker “[wondering] at the power” of his colleagues. The ambiguity of both the verb wonder and the noun power destabilizes any interpretation of the speaker’s wonder as only admiration and gives the line a double meaning. To wonder can, of course, be not only “to be struck with surprise or astonishment, to marvel” but also “to feel some doubt or curiosity (how, whether, why, etc.)” (“wonder, v.”). In this sense,
wondering is not only the opposite of dismay, but also an expression of it. The speaker admires and questions the power of the oil workers, where it comes from, and how they assert it. He may also question what forms of power are really held by “the men / I work for”—not the oil company executives in Calgary and elsewhere, but rather the driller and other immediate supervisors of oil workers who operate in the small, tight hierarchy of an oil rig. The driller, for example, has power over the other oil workers, and a sense of power over the land and landowners, but this power is tenuous, as indicated by the references in the earlier poems to blowouts, to the frustrated neighbour, Jim, whose cannon is aimed at the rig (64), and to the indifference of the steel. Furthermore, power is another name for what the men extract from the earth, to be passed on and wielded by others. With “talk” in the title and at the end of this stanza, the power of the men registers not only (or perhaps not at all) as wonderful but also as illegitimate, and as puffery—as being all talk, or big talk.74

The lines “They make me / rough like their talk” seem at first glance to position the speaker—unconvincingly—as a supposedly innocent young poet who is being contaminated through the oil workers’ talk, both by talking rough like them and by actually becoming rough. But Christensen uses a line break to create tension between the ideas that the oil workers “make me / rough” (by being a bad influence) and that they simply “make me” (that is, that they have shaped and become integral to who the speaker is). This is one of the ways in which all of the workers in Rig Talk are recognizable as poets (as worldmakers). Considering this poem as another moment of disidentification destabilizes the idea that either the rough workers or the naïve poet is a good or bad subject. Instead, the speaker functions as “a ‘disidentificatory subject’ who tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form” (Muñoz

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74 Naden Parkin’s mud-man poetry in A Relationship with Truth: Poem and Verse Born in the Oil Patch (2014) explores the disconnect between the big talk of oil workers and their sense of disempowerment. See chapter 4.
12). Furthermore, even after the poet who only does oil work for a short time has moved on to other work, he holds on to an oil worker’s understanding—an understanding country singer Wade Reeves expresses at the end of a recording of his song “Oil Field Trash” when he says, “Keep that world turnin’ boys. Make it go round, son”—that oil extraction and production workers continue to “make me” as the hidden makers of petromodernity.

Although it is possible to read the second stanza of “Rig Talk” as admiration for powerful men who are not afraid of anything or “ANYBODY,” this reading is not in keeping with the theme of oil work as managing fear that runs through the collection, where the workers’ attacks on nonhuman animals, women, and one another are strategies for “Keeping Fear Away” (18). Instead, this stanza more effectively uses the big letters in “ANYBODY” to signify that its own content is big talk. It represents fear and denial as constitutive of the tough masculinity of the oil worker, and it does this through a mode that is difficult to interpret: laughter. The “I laugh with them” phrase, which makes the always-tenuous distinction between laughing at and laughing with, mingles respect and critique, a critique that comes not from the outside but from the workers themselves. The lines that follow tug at a thread of gender analysis that is woven throughout the book. As both a hypermasculine oil worker and a worker singled out for not being masculine or tough enough, the speaker laughs at the idea that workers have nothing to fear. Considering the sour gas and exploding flames of the first section, and the threat of environmental destruction in the second section, it is clear that the speaker knows he has plenty to fear, and knows he is not the only worker who laughs at the idea that toxic masculinity, extraction, destruction, and denial are the only appropriate responses to fear. *Rig Talk* closes with the suggestion that the conditions of oil work position all workers as disidentificatory subjects.
In an ambivalence built in to the title and premise of Christensen’s book, rig talk is not only the talk of oil workers but also the talk of the rig itself. At the most obvious level, the rig, the metal, and the various technologies of oil extraction register as extractive and ideological tools. Christensen’s descriptions of oil work, for example, offer clear imagery of the rig as tool, as in “Graveyard Shift,” where “Roughnecks work the deck / Spin chain / couple uncouple steel” (25). In lines like these, the metal is simply an object the workers work with and on. This imagery, with its clear delineation of the bodies of the workers and the rigs or machines, is seldom stable, however: like they do in the language of the driller on Cactus Rig 17, the machinery and the human workers overlap and become imperceptible from one another. The workers recognize that they are also being used like tools, both by the “millionaires” who employ, exploit, and endanger them and by indifferent petromodern (over)consumers who “listen to a record / have coffee / turn up the thermostat” without considering that their actions are possible because an oil worker “stood and froze their ass off / in the steel” (32). The rig embodies power, capital, and the indifference of the oil industry and the commodity chain. It is a physical manifestation of capitalist power structures and technological domination of the natural world, in which the oil worker is often counted as one of the tools.

Despite the connections the worker makes with it, the rig is indifferent to the humans who climb, tend, and operate it. As Christensen describes in “Graveyard Shift,” “Muscle is bark on dry sticks / A touch from a spinning drill stem / can leave you dumb broken” (25). The power and indifference of the rigs is evident in Jacqueline Forrie’s illustrations, where the dark, solid metal towers over workers, functioning at a different scale from their seemingly small, soft bodies, showing how vulnerable those bodies are. Her drawing of a derrick flaring natural gas in Figure 9 shows no workers standing at the base of its structure, nor climbing the tower. In the
characteristic style of Forrie’s illustrations, the tower and its flare exceed the frames of both representation and human control. The derrick registers as a nonhuman agent and talking rig. The scale and danger of the rig reveal power relations in which workers, despite their assertions of power and freedom over women, nonhumans, and the land, are also dominated.

Figure 9. “In the Distance” illustration by Jacqueline Forrie. Rig Talk by Peter Christensen, Thistledown, 1981, p. 29. Used with permission.
Feminist historian Carolyn Merchant has identified an ideology of “the death of nature” that played a foundational role in the scientific revolution, modernism, and capitalism: “Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries [in Europe] the image of an organic cosmos with a living female earth at its center gave way to a mechanistic world view in which nature was reconstructed as dead and passive, to be dominated and controlled by humans” (xvi). The replacement of earlier conceptions of nature, as benevolent mother or as disorder, by an image of nature as “a mindless, submissive body” (190) was, as Merchant demonstrates, a misogynist backlash against the power of female monarchs, witches, and midwives, as well as an early capitalist strategy to assert control over nature and Indigenous people. Merchant writes that “[t]he sixteenth- and seventeenth-century [European] imagination perceived a direct correlation between mining and digging into the nooks and crannies of a woman’s body” (39). Christensen’s poetry reveals that the association of mining and extraction with the penetration and rape of a female body persists. Extraction is performed through the tool of the rig in Christensen’s poem “Going Home,” where the speaker says,

Do you know what it’s like to feel
the rig movin’ under ya
Oh so much a woman
Your hand on the sticks
feelin’ the gears
meet slick
in that warm underbelly (48)

and where he goes on to equate the feminized rig not only with the land but also with his truck, women he sees in town and in “a porno movie,” and his wife (49). Through poems like “Going Home,” “The Ride” (50-52), and “Defense” (62), Christensen links the mistreatment of women and the mistreatment of the land.
Inuit musician Tanya Tagaq portrays mother earth as not only benevolent but also angry in “Retribution,” a song and music video that figure a return of the repressed where Mother Earth will not be contained in “modernity’s basement” and where her imminent retribution is revealed as an “energy unconscious” of petromodernity (Yaeger 309). Tagaq says, “Our mother grows angry / Retribution will be swift.” She names the extraction and combustion of fossil fuels (we “suck out her sweet black blood to burn it”) as one of the human actions that makes mother earth angry. Merchant insists that an understanding of the earth as organism that requires balance and reciprocity has never been extinguished; it persists as a viable alternative to and critique of mechanistic and extractivist attitudes toward nature (288). It is most apparent today in the resurgence of Indigenous spirituality and thought, in Canada and around the world, which European mechanistic models never fully colonized or extinguished; it is also, as Merchant observes, at the basis of ecological thought (293). Rig Talk shows that there is also an aspect of the experience of oil work itself that undermines the domination and death of nature. Even as one version of rig talk asserts the power of humans over the earth, oil workers have always known a nonhuman version of rig talk—the blowout, the accident, the spilling of oil or leaking of poisonous gas—that reveals that humans cannot contain or control nature. The ever-present danger of an accident is the reason why Christensen’s speaker and the other oil workers with him disidentify with a seemingly fearless hypermasculinity through their laughter. It is through blowouts and other accidents that the rig speaks another version of rig talk, breaking through and overwriting the humans’ talk, and killing oil workers when it burns (63). In moments where both the workers and the rig itself lose control, the rig registers or translates the speech of the wounded but potent and angry land, as in Christensen’s “Wild Fire,” where natural gas comes rushing up from the earth core fifteen thousand feet
rushing up  
    to greet the fire  
and celebrate a new sun[.] (31)

In a reversal of the poems about modernization and progress that emphasize upward motion, the speaker dives off as “rig steel melts / in the rocket heat[,]” and other workers die in that accident (31). Through the blowout as a form of retribution, oil workers die as they often live, bearing a disproportionate amount of the responsibility that we all share.

In “The Driller Makes a Mistake,” Christensen experiments with concrete poetry to convey rig talking as land speaking. Despite its disappointing appearance in Rig Talk, I consider the concrete section of “The Driller Makes a Mistake,” especially as it appears in manuscript form, as an effective medium for disidentificatory, non-subjective rig talk. In this poem, rig talk undoes a mechanistic view of dead nature and expresses the power and indignation of mother earth.

Okanagan poet Jeanette Armstrong has argued that land and language are related, and that Indigenous languages and Indigenous poetry can constitute “land presence” (180) and “land speaking.” For Armstrong, languages embody different ways of living on the land. English language, for example, is “meant to overpower / to overtake” (184). As a settler, Christensen is “new here,” not Indigenous to the land and not fluent in its language. Extractive land poetics is something he can only disidentify with; he cannot get outside the ideology and language that have shaped him. He does, however, also know the language of the rigs. As a former oil worker who has seen the earth speak through explosions, Christensen experiments with ways of registering that speech through disidentificatory concrete forms.

In an earlier version of “The Driller Makes a Mistake” published in Wayman’s work poetry anthology Going for Coffee, the speaker describes a blowout as part of a left-justified free-verse stanza, but in the Rig Talk version, Christensen tries something different, constructing
and burning down a tower made of words. The concrete section of the poem is, unfortunately, not executed as well in the final version as it was in Christensen’s original manuscript (see Figures 10 and 11). This poem is Christensen’s answer to the extractive and capitalist ideology of progress that he undermines in poems like “Up North”: when a blowout happens and both sour gas and the drilling tower come crashing down, earth intervenes with an assertion of balance. The blowout happens loudly—in all caps—and emphatically, effectively flattening the naïve, modern optimism that Christensen’s speaker disidentifies with in the earlier poems.

The original manuscript version of this poem is my favourite, with the tower appearing more clearly as a tower and the word TWISTS echoing the trusses of the metal structure (as seen in Jacqueline Forrie’s illustrations [see Figure 9]) as well as actually seeming to twist the buckling
drilling tower. Thistledown’s layout of the poem is literally more correct—only the words that relate to the tower make up the concrete image of the tower—but the image wobbles. The words in the tower are difficult to read, and the tower fails to materialize as a tower. “The Driller Makes a Mistake” fails as a concrete poem, but it represents a non-Indigenous oil worker’s experimentation in listening to animate and speaking land. In poetic and concrete instances of rig talking, the rigs speak the indifference of the oil companies, the consumers, and even the land to the toil of the oil workers and the risks they take; in moments where both the workers and the rig itself lose control, the rig also becomes a medium for the speech and the retribution of the wounded but potent and angry land.

As these poems show, the critical ambivalence of disidentification can be messy yet productive. In Christensen’s poetics of understatement, contradiction, juxtaposition, and irony, disidentification often resembles complicity, acquiescence, and hypocrisy. By refusing either to condemn oil workers as bad subjects or to position himself as a good ecological subject, and by questioning petromodern land relations, Christensen recycles the neoliberal ideology of individual responsibility into “response-ability” (Haraway, Staying 11), pointing to disidentificatory forms of solidarity among and with oil workers.

**The Lease by Mathew Henderson**

Mathew Henderson is a writing instructor at Humber College in Toronto. Born and raised in Prince Edward Island, Henderson moved to Alberta with his family after he finished high school in 2003. His father was taking over an oil and gas production testing company owned by his uncle, who had died. Henderson worked as a production tester for a year before starting university, then every summer during his undergraduate degree and before he started his MFA at
the University of Guelph (Cole, Saunders). In a 2013 interview, Henderson describes the job of a production tester:

Basically, a tester has a 30,000-litre tank that can withstand a lot of pressure, and a flarestack that can burn off gas, and the tester drives around the oil patch going wherever someone needs that tank, or they “safely” dispose of excess gas and fluid during some operation or another. We were also responsible for conducting various tests and reporting results to the oil company: salinity, acidity, oil content, oil density, rate of flow, composition of fluid and things like that. Sometimes it involved a great deal of manual labour, and sometimes it was just sitting and looking at gauges. I was really quite bad at my job for the first twenty months. (“Lust”)

The tester’s portable tank, flare stack, pipes, and gauges are used for testing, and also for processes like cleaning the sand out of a well after it has been fracked (see Alberta Learning; Landreth). Notice the ambivalence of Henderson’s description, where the pronouns used for the tester(s) shift between they, we, and I, even several years after he finished working in the oil patch. Starting as a “petulant 17-year-old” (Henderson, “Lust”), and then as a university student and part-time oil worker, Henderson saw his work as temporary and as just “putting in time” (Henderson, “Navigating”), until, as he describes, “[I] realized that experience had been changing me, and that while I was there, I had been thinking about and looking at the place and the people around me—and was changed because of it” (Nolan 103). Although Henderson is clear that there is a difference between his short stints in the oil patch and long-time oil work, he describes his writing as work poetry (see “Lust”; “Navigating”), positioning himself as an insider. *The Lease*, a collection devoted entirely to oil work and the oil patch, is Henderson’s first poetry collection, published by Coach House Books in 2012.

*The Lease* is a rough and stunningly beautiful collection of lyric work poetry. These are readable and relatable narrative poems rich in metaphor and imagery, written by a worker-poet attuned to the poetry and poetics of the oil patch and concerned about the land, the people who work in the oilfields, and his own responsibilities toward both. All of the poems are narrated
from the perspective of a second-person “you”—a perspective that implicates poet and reader alike in the actions of the soft, naïve young man who realizes, belatedly, that he belongs more than he thought in the hypermasculine, homophobic, racist, violent, and sexist culture of the oil patch. The narrator is a production tester who talks about his work in a casual, knowing way, without pausing to catch the reader up, but with rich imagery and poetic insight into the role, the milieu, and the language of the oil worker. The narrator of The Lease uses the rough language of oil work in a tone that Clarke calls “honky-tonk-plain or Tonka-truck-tough” (Maple)—including curses and references to retards, bitches, and Indians (13; 37; 53)—but he does it more self-consciously than Christensen. Whereas Christensen’s poetics of understated rig talk performs a version of masculinity where oil workers suppress their feelings, Henderson’s oil worker poetics is all about feelings, especially feeling guilty. In the opening stanza of the poem “What You Do,” the narrator takes a step back to consider his talk as well as his actions:

> At some point you will drip oil from your glove to the ground and think of how far this place is from real. You will watch ten men catch gophers, paint them red and let them rip each other apart for fear of blood. You will call women whores, measure distance in cunt hairs and encourage a man to go get him some gash. You will wonder if you are still Catholic enough to keep a sin, and if these sins are sharp enough to leave you scarred. (64)

The narrator’s talk, which he calls “your howling” in the closing words of the book (67), is self-consciously confessional and self-centred, while also being subtly politicized, like the glancing reference to Allen Ginsberg’s Howl through the characterization of the narrator’s speech as “howling.”

As the lines from “What You Do” demonstrate, Henderson’s poetry is more verbose than Christensen’s, its longer lines filled with both action and reflection. Many of the poems bear resemblances to the form of the sonnet—especially of Milton Acorn’s Jackpine Sonnets, “a short
poem with a dialectical play of argument” that is “not always limited to fourteen lines” (16).75

Henderson’s Jackpines, either in one long stanza or broken up into stanzas that echo Shakespearean or Petrarchan sonnet forms,76 make up the greater part of The Lease: thirty-nine of the fifty poems fall within Acorn’s capacious parameters, and many of the remaining poems also follow sonnet-like patterns. Henderson’s lines often either use iambic pentameter (as in “and if these sins are sharp enough to leave you scarred” above) or play with and syncopate it, as in these rhythmically awkward lines from his description of drillers, where the metre settles, like the drillers, into a rocking iambic pentameter:

/ ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː /
Awkward as they settle, their arms hanging,
 ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː /
like they know how pointless they are next to
 ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː /
the hydraulics, to the conviction it takes to move
 ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː /
a village like this. Maybe a roughneck grabs
 ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː /
a wrench, cleans a truck or hauls some shit
 ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː /
from here to there, but mostly they just watch
 ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː ː /
the rig rise up around them. (36)

The frequent appearance of a turn or volta at the end or the middle of a poem is another nod to the sonnet. Although Henderson does not adhere strictly to traditional poetic forms, his poetics has the familiar feel of the lyric and the pastoral, so that the narrator’s description of his job as being to “Tend the rusted steel like a shepherd” is resonant and appropriate (9). In a petromodern

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75 In Acorn’s formulation, a sonnet uses “irregular rhyme” (20): it need not use end rhyme or any rhyme at all (18). It can be divided into verses of any length and can have lines of any length (although Acorn “found the ideal line to be, roughly, between 7 and 13 syllables” [19]). A Jackpine Sonnet can run from eleven (or maybe even nine) to twenty lines in length (20).
76 George Elliott Clarke calls the poem “You Ask Your Father What a Lease Is” a “‘blank,’ curtal sonnet,” referencing both Gerard Manley Hopkins’s and his own adaptations of the sonnet form (Maple).
pastoral where “cows gather in darkness near the edge of the site, / scratching thighs against steel tankers” (8), and where oil workers tending tanks and rigs replace shepherds, the country is a resource frontier that can no longer be mistaken as natural or pristine, where the oil worker poet tends and disidentifies with extraction and overconsumption. Through the dialectical form of the sonnet, Henderson’s proletarian, prairie pastorals accommodate the speaker’s abuse of and affection for the “dead prairie” he inhabits (7), his equation of ecocide and misogyny, and the mixture of admiration and contempt he feels for his coworkers and himself.

Unlike Rig Talk, Henderson’s The Lease is not divided into sections. It tells one continuous story, roughly in order from the speaker’s “First Day” (12) near the beginning of the book, to a more mature and experienced view of the oil patch, and finally to the speaker’s move away to Toronto (65) and his anticipated dilemmas about how he will write and talk about his former coworkers, how he might “turn them over in the end” (67). In his lecture on “Navigating Class and Ethics in The Lease,” Henderson identifies three types of poems in the book: general poems about certain experiences (like “Shitting in the Trees” [62]), “poems about very specific equipment” (such as “The Tank” [9] and “Service Rig” [40]), and “portrait poems about people who I met” (usually named after a fictionalized character, like “Renay” [30] or “Todd” [38], or, in the case of the two vernacular poems, with titles like “Joe Talks about Snubbing” [63] that clearly indicate who is speaking). Inside the book, however, the poems do not always fit neatly into these categories. For example, poems about “Cows at Night” (39) or an oil pump (26) read like portraits, and two vernacular poems that mimic the voices of “Dave” and “Joe” also function as self-portraits (52; 63). The poem “Washout” includes a portrait of “a farm girl who might be pretty,” an italicized section spoken in the voice of “Bill,” descriptive lines about the production

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77 For other examples of the petromodern pastoral, see especially Kelly Shepherd’s poems “Mothballing Mould Bay, NWT” (Shift 68-69) and “Birds Migrate at Night, Mostly Unseen” (Insomnia 95).
tester’s equipment and work during a fracking operation (10), an accident when “the sand cuts through the pipe and into the air” (11), and the narrator’s musings about whether the girl notices him. In a sense, all of the poems—and not only “Self-Portrait in Oil” (43), where the narrator considers his reflection in a tank of oil—turn out to be self-portraits, where the narrator of these poems that Henderson describes as “confessional” (“Navigating”) may really be most concerned with the question of “who you really are” (The Lease 55) and the fear that “you”—or everyone else—will forget it (see 14; 27; 28; 57; 64).

In an interview, Henderson says, “the narrator of [The Lease] is deeply flawed” (Nolan 103). The narrator is like a protagonist in a bildungsroman—albeit a protagonist who remains “deeply flawed” until the end. Despite his coworker Dave’s disdain for “This One Guy”—an oil worker who “goes and gets himself a shrink who gets him on comp / because he had a traumatic experience[,]” a guy who, according to Dave, doesn’t know “what work is” (52)78—Henderson’s narrator highlights his own traumatic experience of oil work. Henderson’s poetics contains a volume of what the narrator calls bitching (30) that would be intolerable to the oil workers represented in both Rig Talk and The Lease, who are preoccupied with “keeping fear away.” In this sense, the narrator speaks not as he would to other oil workers like Dave but rather as he would to a more sympathetic listener—he seems to address an audience of poets and poetry readers, rather than oil workers. Speaking with or as rather than to “you,” the narrator complains about the vulnerabilities of his own body and the many threats and injuries he faces. He suffers and then inflicts hazings (15); lusts after Renay, Kelsey, and other women in the patch (10; 30; 46-47); wonders, half seriously, why he has to protect his mouth and nose but not his ears and anus from fatal H₂S gas (32); nurses injuries (46); considers “What Hands Do” as a

78 Seemingly unknowingly, Dave references Philip Levine’s poem “What Work Is.”
dehumanizing reduction of the self to hands that “wring oil from the earth” but “do not speak” (48); and feels a visceral desire to flee rather than open an oil well (49). As the narrator recognizes in the poem “On Driving, Waiting and Killing,” he is simultaneously the driver of the truck whose “engine shaking down / into the tires brings gophers / peeking from their holes[,]” the gophers who can’t—but must—resist “looking for answers,” and the boy with a rifle, waiting for the gophers’ curiosity to drive them out (18). It is from this compromised position that the narrator of The Lease speaks as a disidentificatory subject who recognizes, succumbs to, and works on his ideological interpellation.

In moments of anger, disorientation, drunkenness, or shame, Henderson’s narrator fantasizes, graphically, about killing other workers, to “show the ones who think you’re tender, the ones / who love you, show everyone who doubts / it, who you really are, who you’ve always been” (55). Or, he inflicts violence on himself, punching walls and his own face, drawing his own blood as a way of remembering and delineating who and where he is (37; 57). Both of these responses are bodily symptoms of the violent, colonial, and heteropatriarchal power relations of the oil patch that exploit and endanger him while also interpellating him to occupy the subject position of exploiter and killer of earth, of nonhumans, and of humans. One of the ideologies that Henderson wrestles with in The Lease is one that positions humans, and especially men, as inherently violent, self-interested, and obsessed with fire, as in Andreas Malm’s discussion of “Anthropocene narrative” of climate change (36; 264-73; see also Henderson 8, 36). The narrator’s consideration and ultimate rejection of violence is disidentification with the anthropos of the Anthropocene. In the poem “A Good Day,” Henderson equates the exploitation of workers with the exploitation of the land:

Your aching is an inventory of the way

79 See also “Birthday” (Henderson 33).
the earth has changed, of the iron
bent to your will, the wills of men
who will you. (50)

In the same poem, he describes another version of power, in anticipation of the day the rising ocean

crushes the record
clean, ravines the prairie and scrubs
the sum of your summers to
bent steel beams, cracked alfalfa. (50)

Although he feels like “a child, and an idiot” for inflicting harm on himself (37), the speaker’s self-harm refutes the seeming naturalness of oil extraction: it is not only “muscle lust, fucking with your eyes closed, / the body’s quiet genius” (29), it is also, always—for the earth, for nonhuman life, for women, and for the worker himself—being *fucked*. It sets the world off balance through climate change and the sense that catastrophe—or retribution—is inevitable if combustion and overconsumption are aspects of human nature that cannot be changed. The speaker struggles to manage his subordination not only to other men but also to material discourses about what it means to be a man and to be human. Furthermore, he finds he is subordinated to nature’s power, often represented as oil’s power to kill, to “[take] one guy’s face / clean off” in a blowout (54). In episodes of violence and self-harm, he embodies the sense that he is always both a perpetrator and a victim of systemic violence that he feels responsible for but that he cannot control.

Henderson’s narrator contemplates oil work through the confessional, howling embodiment of a worker who admits his weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Henderson’s poetics resembles the practice of “situated knowledge” that Donna Haraway theorizes as an affirmation of “the particularity and embodiment of all vision” and a rejection of both transcendence and any claim to innocence (“Situated” 189). Haraway’s “critical positioning” of situated knowledge as a
new feminist and postmodern version of epistemology and objectivity (193) is in keeping with Pêcheux’s conception of disidentification as experimental and transformative non-subjectivity. Situated knowledge responds to the postmodern rejection of objectivity and of master narratives with a different way to take grounded scientific, ethical, and political positions. Despite Henderson’s framing of his poetics as “all very personal” and not “historically relevant outside the field of poetry” (“Lust”), I read *The Lease* as disidentification that works on and against the social and cultural position of the oil worker to suggest a politics for oil workers amid the crises of climate change and energy transition.

In “Someday,” the poem that closes *The Lease*, Henderson problematizes the position of the oil worker poet. In the first stanza, the poet/narrator, poised at the moment of leaving oil work and beginning to write about it, worries about how he will represent other oil workers:

> You will lie about these men,  
> cut their rounded edges straight,  
> stretch their lives to simple violence.  
> Each brother you hated,  
> every father you found,  
> you turn them over in the end. (67)

Thinking about the men he has seen as brothers and fathers, he worries that writing about them will be a betrayal, that he will “turn them over” both by distorting the truth about them and by turning them over to be judged by readers. He worries, in particular, about turning over his father, who is the owner of the production testing company where he worked. In the second stanza, the narrator worries about how he will represent himself in relation to the workers: “And you will make yourself apart, / as if you were ever more than trying, than faking, lurking” (67).

He worries, ambivalently, that he will use his partial, subjective experience of oil work to set himself apart either as a poet who was never really one of the workers or as an authority on what oil work is or what it means. (He also wonders whether, despite his conflicting identifications
and disidentifications, he ever became one of the workers rather than only the boss’s son.)

Henderson elucidates the problems with either identifying or counteridentifying as an oil worker or as a poet in “Someday,” but he does not find a solution to these problems.

Henderson explores the same problems further when he describes the ethical dilemmas he faced while writing the book in the abstract for his paper on “Navigating Class and Ethics in The Lease.” He had concerns about positionality—specifically his privileged positioning as a poet, as a person with a university education, and as no longer an oil worker—and how it would undermine any claim he could make to be representative of oil workers or the working class. Furthermore, he had to decide how he would position himself and his narrator in relation to the oil workers he would represent:

While I feared that it would be unethical to include depictions of rampant misogyny or environmentally destructive practices in the poems without explicitly condemning such practices and behaviours, I eventually realized that such condemnations were at odds with the project in that they positioned the speaker of the poems as apart from the characters in the book. Instead, I argue that the clear and honest depiction of such practices is both the most honest and ethically sound way to encounter the contradictions and complexities of the oilfield. (‘Navigating’)

By refusing to condemn the “rampant misogyny or environmentally destructive practices” of oil workers, even though he disagrees with misogyny and ecocide, Henderson positions his poetry and his narrator as disidentifying with oil workers. In lines from the poem “What You Do” that echo the lines “they make me / rough like their talk” from Rig Talk (Christensen 67), the narrator of The Lease responds to the rough talk of one of his colleagues by disidentifying: “When he talks you quease and pull away, but grow a little / more like him for all your shutting up” (64). He refuses to assume the position of a “good” middle-class subject in relation to oil workers. In his present-tense narration about oil work, he also refuses to represent himself, through the narrator, as a “good” oil worker—either as loyal to the oil industry or as being not as bad (racist,
sexist, homophobic, etc.) as the others. Instead of going along with the interpellation of the oil worker as the “bad subject” of petroculture, Henderson makes ideology work against itself by using an oil worker’s voice to interpellate readers.

Except for clearly marked vernacular poems spoken in the first-person voices of other oil workers, Henderson uses second-person narration throughout *The Lease*. In contrast to Christensen’s seemingly careless (although sometimes productive) shifts in narrative perspective, Henderson’s consistent use of second-person narration more clearly signals disidentification. Henderson describes his use of the second-person perspective as a way “to implicate the reader, because I feel very guilty about a lot of things, as a writer, so I wanted to bring other people into that” (Nolan 104). He says, “[w]hen you’re reading ‘you,’ it’s usually pretty clear that it’s me, but I want you to imagine it’s you” (105). In other words, the poetry interpellates the reader.

When the narrator tells himself, “Now open the fucking well and walk the pipe like a healer, / your ungloved palm hovering over the unions” (10), he also challenges the reader to get close to the sites of oil extraction that their way of life and the commodities they purchase come from. Yet, the second-person narration also functions as a tactic of dissociation and deflection of critique or responsibility, in the sense that it wasn’t “me,” it was “you.” In the poem “Who Are You Out There?” when the narrator says, “You’re no part of it. You can only watch” (14), he means, at the most literal level, that the production tester can only watch the roughnecks working on a rig—that their job is not his job. Yet, his utterance also functions at a number of other levels. Addressing the reader, the narrator calls out their voyeuristic watching of the workers. He also draws attention to the neoliberal ideology that makes any reader who is not an oil worker seem to have “no part of” oil extraction, despite their dependence on it. Addressing the oil worker poet himself, he speaks the poet’s sense that he would prefer to have no part in oil work,
drawing attention to how the poet can use the second-person narration to avoid responsibility for the role he played as an oil worker. Finally, the second-person narration reminds the many addressees of the narrator’s “you” that we all have a part in petromodernity and oil extraction: we all share responsibility for the toxic land, gender, race, and class relations of the oil patch.

In his use of disidentification as a way of sharing guilt, Henderson works on neoliberal ideology that is clearly working on him. As Huber observes, in the seeming common sense of the linked ideologies of petromodernity and neoliberalism, individuals feel guilty for their bad choices, while the “free” and seemingly benevolent market and the corporate and state elites who limit citizens’ choices to those proffered by “the fossil-fuel energy regime” are seldom held accountable (*Lifeblood* 162). This can lead to what Alexis Shotwell has called a “purity politics” (7), “a de-collectivizing, de-mobilizing, paradoxical politics of despair” where everyone is guilty and no one seems to have hands clean enough to dissent (9). Henderson seems to succumb to such a purity politics when, in response to a question about why he chooses not to “editorialize” in his poetry, he asks, “How hypocritical would that be? I’d be there making money, leave, then three months later bring on the criticism?” (Nolan 104). This statement demonstrates how ideological interpellation works. As Pêcheux notes, subjects materialize through an ongoing process of “articulation” through ideological interpellation, but there is no apparent beginning to the interpellation—the subject is “preconstructed” through prior, forgotten, interpellations (115). The preconstruction of the subject must be forgotten to give the subject the sense of being both autonomous and individually responsible for their actions. The question “How hypocritical would that be?” calls up the prior interpellation of the speaking-subject: ideology hails Henderson by reminding him that he worked in the oil industry, that he took the money, and therefore that he must have already identified with the industry. Counteridentifying now would
make him a hypocrite, since this becomes a matter of an “identification of the subject with himself” (Pêcheux 118). This “transverse-discourse” relies on metonymy to make the oil worker a petrocultural subject and the former oil worker forever a petrocultural subject (116). A similar process of interpellation hails oil consumers as petrocultural subjects because we drive cars, buy plastic, or contribute to a pension plan that invests in oil companies. Butler intervenes at this juncture to point out that identification is not identity, that identification always introduces “noncoincidence and difference,” and that “it reveals itself to be disidentification from the start” (“Solidarity” 5), so that every identification also contains a thread of disidentification. The question becomes, how do we pick up on that thread so that we can speak in ways that work on and against the neoliberal-petromodern ideology that continues to work on us? Shotwell writes, “Living well might feel impossible, and certainly living purely is impossible. The slate has never been clean, and we can’t wipe off the surface to start fresh—there’s no ‘fresh’ to start. . . . All there is, while things perpetually fall apart, is the possibility of acting from where we are” (4). I see Henderson “acting from where we are” by making use of complicity and guilt to disidentify in response to the ultimatum to be for or against oil.

Henderson’s poetics performs disidentification in a different way from Christensen’s rig talk. Whereas Christensen felt freer to politicize his poetry through its dedication to Alberta and its juxtapositions of oil extraction work with better ways of living on the land, Henderson’s personalized, individualized speech about oil work is limited by neoliberal ideology that prevents complicit individuals from criticizing the systems and power structures in which they are both implicated and disenfranchised. Henderson’s preference for “clear and honest depiction” becomes suspect in relationship to Pêcheux’s argument that meaning is a product of discursive formations linked to ideology: “individuals are ‘interpellated’ as speaking-subjects (as subjects
of *their* discourse) by the discursive formations which represent ‘in language’ the ideological formations that correspond to them” (112). Ideology determines what the subject can and should say (111), but this process usually goes unnoticed. In the context, however, of the construction of oil workers as hypermasculine men who work but “do not speak” (Henderson 48), who do not talk to a “shrink” after they have a traumatic experience (52), and who internalize and suppress their anger and fear, venting it through violence against women, nonhumans, and themselves, I consider Henderson’s confessional poetry as disidentificatory speech that recycles and transforms the ideologies working on him. Disidentification registers in *The Lease* through the narrator’s confessions of his aches and pains, anxieties, failures, and feelings, which I consider to be a form of situated knowledge or “embodied and embedded” critique (Braidotti 51) to counter dominant discourses about the meaning of oil work. It also registers through his portrayal of what I consider to be the non-subjective (disidentificatory) speech of oil workers—what they say when they think no one else is listening.

Pêcheux describes the “shake-up” of the epistemological break (139), where meaning breaks down because it turns out to be ideological, in relation to a question: “What I am referring to is that work of the unthought in thought whereby the very terms of a question, with the answer it presupposes, disappear, so that the question literally loses its meaning while new ‘answers’ form to questions which had not been asked” (137). Such a break occurs around a central question in *The Lease*, the question of what the oil and gas lease is (and means). The narrator works in the oil industry, but he is also a resident of the oil patch, with the mineral rights for his own family’s land leased by an oil and gas company, so that, as the narrator describes in “Washout,”

> When you learned to knead dough, your father’s palms over your hands,
there was a man outside punching holes in the earth,
making your mother’s windows buzz and rattle. (10)

In these lines, the young production tester and his father (who is also his boss) express their settler-colonial connection to the land by “[kneading] dough”—turning grain likely grown on the prairies into food. Yet, they are out of place in the domestic sphere that belongs to the mother, who is said to own the windows (and by extension the house). The mother’s domestic work, perhaps including bread-making, links her to the land, which, the poem nevertheless implies, is owned by the father. The lease undermines the father’s ownership, however: there is another “man outside punching holes in the earth,” as the narrator and his father do on other people’s property. Reading “punching holes,” following Ada Sharpe and Sarah-Jean Krahn’s analysis in *Alberta Holed 'Em*, as an assertion of penetrative and violent patriarchal power, it is clear that everyone in this poem (including the absent mother and the “man outside,” another resident of the oil patch who likely has other men punching holes outside his house) is not only punching holes in bread dough, the land, or a woman, but also being punched.

In one of the portrait poems, the speaker tries to explain to Todd (“Fat, slow and one hell of a guy”) what the lease is:

and the lease, you have to tell him,
is just where you work. No, *Where you work*
is the lease. Confusing because it isn’t beer
or smokes or a car stereo system. (38)

Despite his mocking of Todd’s slowness, the speaker is also confused by the location, dimensions, and meaning of the lease. If the italics in this stanza signal Todd’s speech, it is Todd who understands that the lease is more than “where you work”; it is a discursive formation that creates the material conditions in which “you” can do oil work. The lease is what interpellates you as an oil worker. It is also where “you” live and what rattles the windows—the lease is all
around “you.” As a territorialization of settler-colonial ownership structures, the lease disrupts Aboriginal title and interpellates “you” as a Canadian and potential landowner. As Henderson describes in an interview, the lease is also the part of “you”—your time, your body, your identity, your labour—that you give to the oil industry. It is the part of yourself that you do not own—the part of the self that is not free in the terms of Wayman’s question-as-book-title, *If You’re Not Free at Work, Where Are You Free?* Henderson says, “I think of *The Lease* as a name for the time I spent in the oilfield. I felt like I was leasing myself out, like I was giving over my life in chunks of time” (“Lust”). Through interpellation, the lease seeps into all aspects of “your” identity, restricting what “you” can do and say, and changing who “you” are. Yet, Henderson’s description of the lease as a “bargain” or “trade off” is disidentificatory, limiting how much the lease defines “you.”

In the poem “You Ask Your Father What a Lease Is,” the father answers the narrator’s question with seemingly unrelated information, “about the geese beyond / the aqueduct, how they turn the sky grey, / how as a teen he never put his gun away dirty” (17). The father talks in circles about an ethics of hard work and care for the earth. The lease threatens the settler’s sense of ownership, making ownership of the land both relative (where it is possible to own the surface but not what is underneath) and absolute (where surface rights law serves to guarantee that mineral rights owners will have access to the land). From his complex and compromised position as a landowner and production testing contractor, the father represents the lease as a responsibility. In the stanza that follows, the narrator draws his own conclusions about the lease:

The lease is meaningless: a square paced first by seismic workers, and then your father, and then by every other man you know. But you’ve always pulled meaning from nothing, and when he leads you to an empty field you tear grass in fistfuls, read the roots like a will. (17)
In this stanza, the narrator follows his father to consider the idea that the lease is “an empty field,” a square of land, paced by men who represent ownership by the father, ownership by the province, and ownership by the oil and gas company that leases the mineral rights. The men who pace the square are his father and community members, people who reinforce the father’s settler-colonial ownership of and belonging to the land, but the same men are also the oil workers whose presence shows that he does not really own the land. The repeated act of pacing, emphasized by the iambic metre of the line “and then by every other man you know,” demonstrates that the lease is a performative discursive formation, an ideology that must constantly be reproduced by its subjects. In this context, however, where it is overwritten by different ideologies embodied by the same men, the lease becomes “meaningless.” The narrator’s attempt to see the lease in the land itself begins as an attempt to make concrete the abstractions of capital. Despite the fact that the resources it lays claim to cannot be seen from the surface of the land, nor read in the roots of the grass, the lease is incredibly lucrative. The poet thinks he can understand this because he is a poet who, like an oil executive or even an oil rig, knows how “to pull meaning from nothing,” and this points to the lease as a mode of worldmaking or petropoetics. The narrator “[reads] the roots” he pulls out of the soil “like a will,” as one might read a surface rights agreement or a lease, but he is also looking for his inheritance. The roots are not a human-authored will, however, and I suggest that when the narrator reads them, he recognizes them as a different kind of will, as an expression of the agency and desire of the earth itself. This kind of reading suggests a different way of relating to the land or of defining ownership, a disidentification with settler-colonial land ownership that reveals that treaties are another way of “[pulling] meaning from nothing.” After an epistemological shift that exposes the
way the oil industry, the province, the nation-state, and the settler write on and shape the land, without legitimately owning or knowing it, the narrator tries to interpret what the land says back.

Henderson’s poetics is more politically correct than Christensen’s, but this is achieved, in part, by making few references to Indigenous people or to racism in *The Lease*. As Clarke notes, “Henderson writes often of Caucasians ‘coloured’ by sun, oil, or gas, but seldom about ‘the Natives,’ whose land is being looted of its resources. ‘Colour’ is pronounced, but it’s class that’s privileged” (*Maple;* see Henderson 16; 53; 61). In his portrait poem about “Dave,” for example, Henderson’s speaker implies that Dave is racist, and leaves it to the reader’s imagination to guess, based on some of the “shit he says,” what kinds of things Dave has said about Indigenous people and other people of colour:

Did he sleep on the flight
back from Saudi? Could he keep his tongue in check,
surrounded by men so much darker than the Natives
who sleep, curled up, on his hometown streets? (61)

Henderson’s lines use the implied speech of the oil worker to link the stereotype of homeless Indigenous people in prairie cities with the colonialism and structural racism that are inherent to the global oil industry, as well as Dave’s presumed racist thoughts. As Diné (Navajo) poet Sherwin Bitsui writes in his poem ANWR, “When we are out of gas, / a headache haloes the roof, / darkening the skin of everyone who has a full tank” (33). With reference to the controversy over proposals to drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Bitsui theorizes the relationship between the oil industry and the colonial appropriation of land and resources. “Darkening the skin” of the people whose territory the oil is in is the racialization of Indigenous people as a way to justify their dispossession. In Henderson’s poem, such racism both goes without saying and is unspeakable. In fact, racism is naturalized in the ideology represented by the lease, which ignores Indigenous peoples’ precedent title to make their homes on the land.
Henderson’s narrator assumes a particular version of who sleeps illegitimately in whose home, but the epistemological break that reveals themeaninglessness of the lease and the settler’s claim on the land also figures both Dave and the narrator as squatters or occupiers on Indigenous land, without a legitimate place to lay their heads. The poem “Dave” suggests that racism is a response to the possibility that current relations of possession and dispossession are illegitimate and reversible. Henderson’s narrator seems to know this, but his reluctance to say it is a sign both of his disidentification with oil workers and his discomfort about what he can or should say.

As I have already highlighted, neoliberal ideology works differently in Rig Talk and The Lease, producing different versions of disidentification. The poetry collections contain moments of similar class-based analysis and observation, and in some ways Henderson’s analysis appears to be more prominent because of the way it is inserted through the speaker’s reflections rather than suggested through juxtaposition and an ironic or parodic tone (see for example Henderson 8; 50). Despite this, I distinguish between the stark power differentials of Rig Talk (where the job of the oil worker is to tend “the campfires of millionaires” [9] and where the rig represents corporate power) and the seemingly diffuse networks of power and responsibility that the speaker of The Lease perceives himself to be subject to. Although neoliberalism has, as Harvey shows, exacerbated inequality and widened the gap between the rich and poor, Henderson’s narrator is just as likely to attribute his unfreedom to the force of “the wills of men / who will you” (50) as he is to a force exerted by the machinery itself, as in his description of his job as being to “Watch the gypsy iron / move, follow its commands. / Tend the rusted steel like a shepherd” (9). Because of this, rigs, machinery, and other tools talk differently in The Lease than they do in Rig Talk.
Using imagery that echoes Christensen’s description of an oil worker as an “expendable machine” (32), Henderson portrays workers as being turned into tools through their work. In “Fenceless,” Henderson describes the production tester’s movement along above-ground pipes between the well, the tank, and the flare: “you walk the field, tool to tool, / with no sense of what is yours, and what is not” (8). Both walking from “tool to tool” and being a tool that walks to other tools, the worker senses that he is not only operating the machinery but also being operated with it. When Henderson describes rig workers as being “like tanned gears sweating beside each other” (14), I notice a difference from Christensen’s equation of humans and tools. Beyond comparing workers to machines or tools, Henderson imagines a hybrid human-machine made up of parts like “tanned gears.” In The Lease, it is not only the humans who become like tools but also the tools that are humanized, so that the metal machinery itself can be a friend, a boss, and a life that needs tending. For example, the Texsteam pump that the speaker repairs is a living, breathing thing with an “aching gasket” and “broken diaphragm”: “You change old pieces for new metal, / plastic-wrapped parts, fresh lungs in their boxes: / small and glinting, breathing shallow in and out” (26). This poem explores the worker’s relationship with the machines he uses and his sense that they are living things he feels an obligation to keep alive and protect. In “The Tank,” the production tester’s tank “sticks and sucks, like a mouth, / against everything it touches” (9). In these lines, the tank shows its own disidentificatory will: it sucks on but is also “against” the things it is supposed to work on and with. I cannot be excited about the posthuman animacy of the metal in instances like these, because the posthumanism of such images functions too effectively to shield humans—especially extremely wealthy and powerful ones—from responsibility, and to make the speaker feel loyal to metal that does not love him back. Instead, such imagery demonstrates how the machinery itself hails the oil worker to tend it.
Like his sense of loyalty to his father, the narrator feels an obligation to protect oil infrastructures, oil workers, and, metonymically, the oil industry. Despite their seemingly benevolent corporate sponsorships and the popular perception that oil workers are overpaid for their dangerous work, oil companies are driven by profit and are not loyal to oil workers, to human life, or to the earth. This is demonstrated by the more permanent legacies of the “fossil economy” (Malm 4), including global climate change and local crises such as abandoned oil wells. Henderson’s guilty sense that he owes something to the oil industry is not reciprocated by the machines he tended or the executives who profited from his work. As a 2017 Petroleum Labour Market Information report on employment in the oil and gas industry in Canada indicates, oil companies underwent a “transformation” in response to low oil prices beginning in 2014: they used automation and “productivity enhancements” to eliminate jobs and cut costs (Workforce Insights 9). Now, even if prices go up, “it is highly unlikely that Canada’s oil and gas industry will rehire all the workers” (3). Although the oil industry fosters and demands family-like loyalty, it does not love workers back. The idea that we should all feel concern when the oil industry has, for example, a “headache” ought to raise more suspicion than it does (see Cunningham; Tuttle).

Although the narrator may sometimes have cozy feelings about the equipment he works with, rigs talk most powerfully in The Lease, as they do in Rig Talk, through the accident and the blowout. In “Newell,” three workers driving home from “[a] short day, a shallow frack” see the smoke of a blowout in Newell, Alberta; they will learn later that two people died. They respond by curling into themselves,

On that day, you drive with your asses off the leather, so close to yourselves, toes curling after something solid, a foothold inside your steel-toed boots. (54)
The workers seem to be reminded of how insignificant they are in relation to the power the blowout materializes, both the power of the earth and the power of the oil companies. Although Dave might criticize that “one guy” for being traumatized by an accident even though he was “[n]owhere near it” (52), it is the millionaires—the CEOs, executives, politicians, and other privileged petrocitizens—who are really nowhere nearby when a rig bursts into flames. The blowout reminds the oil workers that their lives are more valuable than the money their labour and their safety can be traded for. In the “trade off” relations of the lease where the worker thinks they are handing over only part of their life, they risk making a bad trade where they lose their whole life. Such moments define the boundaries of what an oil worker is and is not willing to do or to trade. In other words, they show that the identifications of oil workers are always also disidentifications.

Henderson’s poem “Joe Talks about Snubbing” is a vernacular poem that includes an interjection of talk by the narrator in its rough rig talk. According to Schlumberger’s Oilfield Glossary, snubbing is a well-drilling term, “[t]he act of putting drillpipe into the wellbore when the blowout preventers (BOPs) are closed and pressure is contained in the well” (“snubbing”), but Joe gives his own definition of this job inside the poem:

Most dangerous job in the patch, really,
I won’t even do it. Clint, you know Clint,
he lost his supe on a snubjob—his first week
of fieldwork too. Clint told me the rig burned
so hot they had to pry bones from the metal—
that’s a closed-casket, boy, rough service. Rough.

But yeah, it’s tripping under pressure.
Basically pushing pipe down a hole
that wants to push you back. It’s when
the patch itself gets so goddamn angry—
This poem that conveys the rig talk of an oil worker also conveys the speech of the oil rig and the land. When Joe says “the rig burned” where the reader might expect him to say “the fire burned,” he makes the fire an utterance by the rig or perhaps the land. And when the bones of the workers have to be pried from the metal, the imagery that links human lives and metal is gory rather than cozy. In Joe’s description, snubbing is a violation of the will of the land that “wants to push you back.” The blowout that killed Clint’s supe is described as an act of retribution committed by the land after “the patch itself gets so goddamn angry.” Joe probably said more about snubbing, but his voice drops off here, since the narrator forgets what Joe said next. The narrator’s memory splices the scene of Joe talking about snubbing with a seemingly unrelated conversation where Joe instructs his listeners on how to “avoid the nipple” and arouse a woman. In the third stanza, the narrator—“you”—sets the scene, complete with Joe’s “dirty or freckled” elbows and his miming, “darting his tongue / in and out under the imaginary tit.” The final stanza is narrated by Joe again:

Right there, that’s what they like,  
just underneath. Get your tongue  
in there, boys. My ex-wife, real good girl,  
Christ, she giggled like fuck for that. (63)

We can feel the narrator-poet blush as he says things he would never say in a way he would never say them, parroting the voice of Joe. Yet, through this seeming accident of memory, the narrator shows Joe saying something he did not know he would say: he links patriarchal gender relations with extractive oil relations. This is a product of the speaker’s disidentification with Joe. Both Mother Earth and Joe’s “good girl” ex have shown benevolence and anger to the oil worker. In contrast to the wife’s pleasure, snubbing registers as rape, and the oil worker reveals his sense that oil extraction takes place without the consent of the earth. Furthermore, Joe reveals his disidentificatory ethics of what he will and “won’t even do” for money or for the oil industry.
In “Remember Charlie,” the narrator describes a day of safety training, “a day with WHMIS and Piper Alpha / and a videotape of Charlie, burned up.” Remember Charlie is a safety awareness video that Henderson’s speaker and the other workers watch as part of their training. In the video, former oil worker Charlie Morecraft tells the story of an explosion he caused through negligent behaviour, and of his long and painful recovery in the burn ward. Morecraft shows the scarring from burns on his arms where he had cut the sleeves off of his flame-retardant shirt. In Henderson’s poetry, workers, who have all seen the video, half-jokingly admonish one another to be safe by telling each other to “remember Charlie” (see Henderson 40). In the second stanza, after watching the video, the workers joke about trading body parts for compensation: “You all figure you’d cook half your body, / the lower half, for an even million.” But in the third stanza, the jokes are no longer funny when they see Joel, a former coworker who lost his hand in an accident. After that, “you find / yourself tuned to every clash of steel on steel / you see snakes shedding skin in hospital beds / you remember Charlie, and you begin to wait” (31). I interpret the positioning of the worker who continues to work for now, but who also waits, as the disidentificatory positioning of the worker waiting for an accident, for the moment he is no longer willing to do such dangerous work at all, for the coming energy transition, or for the apocalyptic arrival of climate change. As Butler argues, disidentification is there in every identification—every contract, treaty or negotiation that upholds the relations that Henderson calls “the lease.” Disidentification waits in all of us, gathering resources, knowledge, and momentum, reading the roots of our responsibilities as response-ability, waiting for a solidarity to come, where we shift the limits of what we “won’t even do” anymore.
Conclusion

Both *Rig Talk* and *The Lease* have been treated by their authors, publishers, and readers as firsts in an emerging tradition of oil worker poetry, but as I have shown, this is not the most interesting similarity between the two books. My reading of both texts in terms of their disidentificatory performance of the talk of oil workers, poets, rigs, and the lease demonstrates the ways in which subjects hailed by the role, social position, and stereotypes of the oil worker respond in disidentificatory ways. I consider petrocultural disidentification as an alternative to both neoliberal sincerity and the divisive politics that tend to position Canadians as either for the land or for the family of the oil industry. Disidentification reveals that such allegiances are not as clear-cut as they seem. Muñoz writes, “disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (31). I interpret both *Rig Talk* and *The Lease* as prefiguring disidentificatory solidarities made up of subjects who can come together not because they are the same but because of their desire, in the face of the futility of the tired ideologies of the fossil economy, settler colonialism, and patriarchy, for a different version of worldmaking.
Chapter 3: “my love is not dead yet”: Contrary Infatuation, Cruel Optimism, and Impasse

Dymphny Dronyk is a mediator and writer who has worked as a contractor in the oil industry, doing jobs like negotiating surface rights with landowners and writing safety manuals for residents of the oil patch. Dronyk’s first poetry collection, *Contrary Infatuations*, was published while she was living and working in the Alberta oil patch. In this collection of work poetry, Dronyk draws parallels between the different forms of reproductive labour (caring work) performed by an off-grid camp cook for tree planters; a wife caring for her dying and mentally ill husband; a mother protecting her children from their father and then, after his death, protecting his memory for her children; a resident of the Peace Country in northwestern Alberta, where people live and farm with oil and gas wells practically or literally in their backyards; a nature lover acquiring surface rights for oil development; and “The Only Girl at the Rig” (77), playing a mothering and softening role in the oil industry. The book ends with “The Patch Poems, 2006,” a sequence of poems written about working in the oil patch. Although at first glance it seems that only this closing section is about oil work, I argue in this chapter that it is possible to read the entire collection as being about oil, especially its theorization of the bad love that Dronyk calls “contrary infatuation.”

*Contrary Infatuations* is a collection of lyric, narrative work poetry, published by Frontenac House in 2007. Dronyk’s lines are short and simple, giving a slow pace to the verse that invites readers to pause over its plain surfaces, to wonder (like a geologist or a prospector wonders) what is hidden underneath. Written over at least 20 years, *Contrary Infatuations* touches on many themes and is based on events in Dronyk’s own life. The book begins with “Blue North Blues,” an opening section that draws on Dronyk’s experiences across a range of
times and places and stitches them into a patchwork of love interests, pastoral scenes, family crises, and recovery. The three sections that follow are structured as sequences of numbered and titled poems—or perhaps as long poems. They offer extended poetic meditations from inside three of Dronyk’s own experiences: “Camp Cook, Tree Planting Poems” is about being an off-grid camp cook for tree planters; “Astrocytoma” is about caring for a dying husband whose illness and trauma have made him a “madman” (72), and “The Patch Poems, 2006” is about being a rare woman working in the Alberta oil industry. It is through the book’s title, *Contrary Infatuations*, that the diverse and seemingly unrelated stories told across the four sections come together to form a pattern. The title makes theoretical claims that the speaker hardly considers inside the individual poems—that her life has been structured by the relations of “contrary infatuation,” and furthermore that contrary infatuation is a structure of feeling not only of the oil patch but also of “petromodernity” (LeMenager 67).

A tension between what can and cannot be spoken runs through Dronyk’s collection. While telling about her discomfort and complicity with the oil industry—feelings paralleled by other “contrary infatuations” such as the one that kept her and her children in a relationship with an abusive man—Dronyk’s speaker reveals that her identification with extractive, settler-colonial ideology is always also “disidentification” (Pêcheux 158).80 The speaker of Dronyk’s oil poems is concerned with questions of personal responsibility and complicity; yet she uses her own and others’ entanglement with oil to justify her choice to work for oil companies and undermine landowners’ resistance to oil development. She is accustomed to managing contrary infatuation through a protocol of “What We Don’t Say” that allows her to avoid either looking like a hypocrite herself or exposing the hypocrisies of others (Dronyk 80), but the poetry reveals that

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80 See my discussion of Michel Pêcheux’s, José Esteban Muñoz’s, and Judith Butler’s theorizations of disidentification in chapter 2.
she thinks and feels more than she says. The result is that the thinking about oil that happens in the poetry collection takes both conscious and unconscious forms, with the poetry saying more than it realizes about oil. *Contrary Infatuations* theorizes, ambivalently, about the structure of feeling of the cultural condition that energy humanities critics call *impasse*, “the gap between knowledge and action, insight and involvement” (Boyer and Szeman 40). Impasse is petromodern citizens’ knowledge that we need to break up with oil, combined with our sense of our inability to do so. *Contrary Infatuations* offers images or metaphors of impasse, drawn from the life of an entangled and complicit woman. It offers an affective register of the attachments that we resist breaking, suggesting that understanding the structure of feeling of impasse—rather than proposing to overcome it as quickly as possible—may be an important step in transitioning away from fossil fuel extraction and consumption.

**What is Contrary Infatuation?**

Contrary infatuation seems to involve loving things that contradict one another, or loving something that is bad for the self, that is not lovable, or that does not love back. Or, more simply, it observes that opposites attract. It invokes love while questioning whether what it describes really is love—is it just infatuation? Pushing this line of thought a bit further, it asks what is contrary, or opposite, to infatuation, so that other emotions such as dislike, anger, hate, and boredom also come into play. Contrary infatuation speaks to contradictions between what we love and what we do—between our values and our actions. With so many possible interpretations of what contrary infatuation is, Dronyk offers no gloss on the meaning of the term, and she uses it only once inside the pages of her book, as the title of a poem. Rather than a
definition, the reader is offered a jumbled and incomplete affective map—instances of what contrary infatuation feels and looks like.

The title poem offers a somewhat bland example of contrary infatuation: the speaker notices that her lover was most attracted to her not when she “bathed at midnight / and softened [her] feet / in hopes that you’d kiss them” but when she was “dirty and wet” while they were apple picking (13). The poem hints at its end, however, at the more grimly contrary aspects of this infatuation, with the appearance of the word *bruised*:

you picked leaves  
out of my tangled braid  
and bruised  
my sweaty neck  
with kisses. (13)

The mingling of love and violence that is so benignly introduced here is a recurring motif in *Contrary Infatuations* and a sign of the escalation of violence or its threat that will come in the later poems. The next reference to bruises is “the bruised / purple of the concave sky” in the northern Alberta village of Hythe in the poem “Harvest Storm” (21). Dronyk uses metaphors for a sky so beautiful it hurts to describe the place where her family lived when her husband died. It was also in Hythe that Dronyk lived on a farm near the Trickle Creek community led by eco-religious saboteur Wiebo Ludwig. Ludwig’s declaration of war on the oil industry, and the escalating sabotage of oil and gas wells attributed to Ludwig and his followers, had residents on edge while Dronyk lived there. Dronyk names neither Ludwig nor Trickle Creek in *Contrary Infatuations*; her concerns and opinions about them are present as a subtext of the poetry and an “energy unconscious” (Yaeger 309), one that Gordon Jaremko picks up on in his review for the *Edmonton Journal* titled “The Blunt Bard of Wiebo Country; Dymphny Dronyk Immortalizes Oilpatch.” The three poems about Hythe are cryptic pastorals, bittersweet odes to a beautiful and
terrifying place “at the edge” (19), on a frontier of resource extraction and a battleground over sour gas.

Dronyk uses bruised next in “Astrocytoma” to describe what cancer does to the speaker’s husband: it “left you alone / in a bruised mind” (66). Similarly, in “Surface Rights Acquisition—What We Don’t Say,” the people who negotiate surface rights on behalf of oil companies have “bruised souls” (81)—bruised, it seems, by not being able to speak plainly to landowners (and possibly also to themselves) about how impossible it is to avoid being entangled in the oil industry. Mental, emotional, and perhaps physical bruising become signs of contrary infatuation throughout the book. The points on the affective map of contrary infatuation mark a pattern that gathers around a feeling, or a mood, tying together the poet/speaker’s relationships with men and patriarchy, with the land, with capital, and with oil. Bruising is a sign of contact that arrives late and lasts much longer than the brief moment of contact. It can offer a retrospective analysis that a relationship or a touch was problematic. In Contrary Infatuations, the analysis of the bruise extends to relations between humans as well as human relationships with oil and the land.

Contrary infatuation unifies an otherwise disjointed poetry collection by describing a mood or a structure of feeling that resonates between the poems and sections in the book, offering theorizations of the present that are registered emotionally before they can be thought or spoken. In Raymond Williams’s formulation, a “structure of feeling” is a mood or “style” of a generation or period that may not yet have been theorized or named, a way of accounting for “what is actually being lived” inside a culture (Marxism 131). As Williams argues, a structure of feeling is “a cultural hypothesis” that combines “thought as feeling and feeling as thought” (132). This is because, as Lauren Berlant summarizes, “the present is perceived, first, affectively” (Cruel 4). Dronyk’s affective theorization of petromodernity through the structure of feeling of contrary
infatuation is grounded in the Peace Country and her own identity and embodiment as a settler-Canadian woman; yet, contrary infatuation also serves to describe a broader sense of life in petromodernity. Contrary infatuation can be used to explore the sense of impasse in the face of global climate change and the toxic effects of natural gas extraction, as well as the reasons why we tend to choose impasse over change; in some instances, it can also offer insights into what might come after impasse.

Contrary infatuation is similar to “cruel optimism,” a term Berlant coined in a journal article in 2006. Although Berlant’s analysis in the article and her 2011 book Cruel Optimism is not about oil, her concept is useful for describing a structure of feeling shaped by early-twenty-first century humans’ complicated relationships with fossil fuels. Cruel optimism is attachment to something that is both harmful and seemingly necessary to the self. It is a state of desire, of optimism that doesn’t always feel good, of cruelty that doesn’t always feel bad, and of “living on” in times of crisis (Cruel 8). Influenced by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s interpretation of Melanie Klein’s paranoid/schizoid and depressive/reparative positions, Berlant rejects the idea that it is easy to distinguish between good and bad objects, or that it is easy to break off a relationship with an object that proves to be problematic. Berlant describes cruel optimism as “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” and the fear that “the loss of the promising object/scene itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything” (24). It describes the mood or attitude through which people carry on, continuing to look forward even in moments when it seems there is nothing to look forward to, twisting optimism and desire to suit the limited options available to them and further entangling

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81 I am suggesting that Berlant and Dronyk developed these concepts around the same time but independently of one another.
themselves in relationship to the “problematic object” that seems both to offer them freedom and to limit their range of motion within the systems they navigate.

With the real threats of global warming and environmental destruction rendering ongoing fossil fuel extraction, production, and consumption unconscionable, and yet with our economies, our infrastructures, and our personal lives so dependent on oil, the structure of feeling of cruel optimism resonates for petromodern citizens who care about the earth and the future but who struggle to imagine ways of living without oil. Cruel optimism exists in relation to the promise of the good life, a promise that gets distorted as the prospects for living in a long moment of crisis shift toward the mere reproduction of life—not living well but living on, “treading water in the impasse” (Berlant, Cruel 249). Impasse is a concept that has become important in the energy humanities to describe a cultural space of both impossibility and potentiality—of knowing we need to change but not yet knowing how. Berlant describes impasse as a sense of time stretching out into a long present where the subjects inside it do not know how things will turn out:

Whatever else it is, and however one enters it, the historical present—as an impasse, a thick moment of ongoingness, a situation that can absorb many genres without having one itself—is a middle without boundaries, edges, a shape. It is experienced in transitions and transactions. It is the name for the space where the urgencies of livelihood are worked out all over again, without assurances of futurity, but nevertheless proceeding via durable norms of adaptation. People are destroyed in it, or discouraged but maintaining, or happily managing things, or playful and enthralled. (200)

Although the Petrocultures Research Group spins impasse in a more optimistic way, contrasting the relations of cruel optimism with the hope of potential transition opened by the impasse (After Oil 15-16), for Berlant, impasse is a mood that does not necessarily translate to social justice or to knowledge of how to change things. Furthermore, the recognition of the conditions of impasse is not an epiphany: it is not necessarily politicizing, although it may be used politically. Recognizing cruel optimism offers not a way out of but a way into the impasse—a way of
accounting for (theorizing) the situation one finds oneself in (195). The mood of impasse is not only a bad mood: Berlant’s framework of cruel optimism agrees with Stephanie LeMenager’s argument in *Living Oil* that petromodern affect ranges from loving oil (sometimes ecstatically) to petromelancholically grieving its loss. LeMenager likewise calls our attachment with oil “destructive attachment, bad love” (11). The futurity of cruel optimism predicts that impasse and its attendant modes of survival (as adaptation, acceptance of precarity, habit) will persist. Impasse is not something that can be quickly or easily overcome, and the theory of cruel optimism, like contrary infatuation, considers why this is the case.

Dronyk’s *Contrary Infatuations* exemplifies the relationship between feeling and thought that both Williams and Berlant emphasize. By stringing together a series of affective snapshots drawn from her own experiences, Dronyk theorizes the structure of feeling of contrary infatuation. She does this without giving up her own sense of optimistic attachment to the present and to oil. Her reading of the present complements and extends Berlant’s analysis of cruel optimism, theorizing from inside the oil patch, reproductive labour, and optimism itself. It also theorizes impasse differently from cruel optimism by considering the tension created through forms of contrary infatuation that involve loving two objects that contradict one another, such as loving wilderness and oil. Dronyk ties contrary infatuation to oil without limiting her poetic analysis to the work she does for pay within the oil industry, focusing instead on the reproductive labour that women and all petromodern citizens do to keep the oil system humming. At times, the book theorizes contrary infatuation despite Dronyk, blurring the lines between irony and naïveté and demonstrating the sense in which some ideas are grasped affectively before they are adopted consciously.
Contrary Infatuation as “destructive love affair”

The speaker’s relationship with her husband is the most affectively charged example of contrary infatuation in Dronyk’s book. It serves as a gauge against which other forms of contrary infatuation are measured. An example of contrary infatuation that is repurposed from one part of Dronyk’s life and applied to her entanglement with oil, this relationship is also infused with oil from the beginning. It involves at turns the contrary infatuation of loving a person who is far away, of loving someone who is not the person she fell in love with, and, troublingly, of loving and staying with someone she is afraid of. In an interview, Berlant calls “[a] destructive love affair” her “favorite example” of cruel optimism and uses the scene of leaving a bad relationship (where the self gets hurt whether she stays or leaves) to ask, “Why is it so hard to leave those forms of life that don’t work?” (“Lauren Berlant”). For Berlant and for Dronyk, the scene of the destructive love affair is a potent image of why we stay in an impasse.

In “Soldier, Sailor,” the speaker says, “Make love to me like a soldier” and “Make love to me like a sailor,” but the lover’s gun “gleams maliciously in the moonlight” and the speaker feels “troubled / and spent, your desperate arms too tight / around my neck.” She wrestles with her attraction to and fear of a militarized man, a man whose too-tight love threatens to leave a bruise, a man trained to kill, who has “macho dreams,” a man who will leave her for long stretches of time, and, as the poem hints in the lines “You don’t know it yet, but / all your generals are insane” (22), a man who will be changed by war.

In “Our Empty, Empty Bed,” in which the speaker’s husband is a soldier or perhaps an oil contractor stationed in the Middle East during the Gulf War (1990-91), oil is revealed to be political:

soldiers sleep at the edge of your well sites
trigger fingers poised
for your safety. (24)

The repetition of the word your in this stanza draws attention to the differences between where the speaker is and where her husband is, implicitly comparing the Middle Eastern (perhaps Saudi Arabian or Kuwaiti) wells to her well sites—the seemingly apolitical sites in Canada. It highlights the blatant hypocrisies of the war her husband is fighting: ostensibly about protecting Kuwait from invasion by Iraq, the American-led Gulf War was clearly meant to claim Kuwaiti, Iraqi, and Saudi Arabian oil for the United States and its allies—that is, to claim that the well sites are ours (Hurst 8, 106; McQuaig 273-76). The first your in the stanza draws attention to the second one, which refers to “your safety” as something worth protecting; it belies the claim that the coalition forces were protecting Kuwaiti or Iraqi citizens, revealing the thinly veiled self-interest in the war. Further, the speaker uses the corporate speak of the safety warning (“for your safety”) to ironize the idea that the wells were being guarded for the safety of the soldiers or workers—to suggest, instead, that their lives had been deemed expendable in the preservation of the wells themselves. A war fought for love of oil, the Gulf War reveals that oil and our relationships with it are not innocuous. It undermines the idea that living close to oil development offers wealth, health, or security to nearby residents.

Dronyk lived in Victoria at the time of the war in 1990 and 1991, but tensions between her future neighbours at Trickle Creek and the oil industry were mounting. According to Andrew Nikiforuk’s history of the conflicts between Ludwig and the industry, it was in early 1990 that a new well drilled adjacent to the community first accidentally released sour gas, causing miscarriages in humans, goats, and sheep, as well as other health problems (Saboteurs 26-27). The industry refused to admit that sour gas could have these well-known effects and refused to accept responsibility. Nikiforuk sees this as the moment of the radicalization of Wiebo Ludwig
and his community, who are believed to be responsible for (and in some cases have been found guilty of) acts of sabotage to well sites and oil infrastructure in the Peace Country, including a well site adjacent to Dronyk’s property, sometime after she moved to Hythe in 1993 (Blatchford). Although Ludwig’s methods and the patriarchal rules of his community were offensive to many of his neighbours, including Dronyk, he voiced concerns that were common to many inhabitants of the Alberta oil patch. With his “war” on the oil industry echoing the imagery and tactics of the Gulf War (for example, his sabotage of wells recalls the strategic oil well fires started by retreating Iraqi forces in Kuwait), Ludwig showed that the Canadian oil patch is a sacrifice zone for capitalist development and that, even in Canada, oil development and democratic government hardly go hand in hand.

While Dronyk’s speaker tries to make distinctions between where her husband is and where she is, the differences collapse, especially in her dreams. “I float alone in our bed,” she says, unable to ground herself firmly either in her “safe little life” in Canada or in the Middle East with her unsafe-but-guarded husband. Dreaming of a bomb exploding in the Gulf, the speaker is awakened by her own screams. Like many Canadians did, she follows the war on the news, watching “missiles flare / on the television’s night skies” (25), but she is unable to distance herself from the violence. Although Dronyk’s speaker tries to focus on differences between the politics of oil in the Middle East and the oil development she wants to see as apolitical at home, the well sites in Canada and in the Persian Gulf have some troubling similarities. These similarities suggest, darkly and presciently, that Canadians are not immune to the so-called “resource curse” whereby Indigenous peoples and other residents near the sites of natural resource extraction are worse off rather than better.⁸² Not able to distinguish between bad well

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⁸² Jennifer Wenzel considers the “resource-curse hypothesis” as a myth that is often used by people from the “First World” to describe petro-states in the Global South: it “holds that bad governance and violent conflict are the
sites and good or safe ones, the speaker experiences contrary infatuation as feeling “hollow” (24), as floating, as detachment, and as “[her] words choked back” (25).

After he returns from the war, the speaker’s husband works as a logger. He leaves very early in the morning and comes home smelling of gasoline. In “4 a.m.” the speaker says,

Tonight he will
shower and reappear human
his hair smelling like
shampoo instead of gasoline. (28)

She suggests that the husband’s shampoo, likely made of petroleum and contained in plastic packaging, smells human while gasoline does not. Gasoline here is the smell of the chainsaw, and of labour; shampoo smells of domestic or public life outside of work—yet, these are two sides of the same coin, two faces of petromodernity. There is also something suspicious about the way the husband emerges from the shower, having substituted one version of oil for another: he reappears human, but how human is he? In a formulation that equates humanness with goodness, the husband’s humanness is both undermined and reproduced through oil. This is a

inevitable lot of nation-states unlucky enough to be so well endowed with natural resources coveted by industrial capitalism that they can run their entire economies on them” (“Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited” 220). Rob Nixon argues that “Australia and Canada are resource rich but not resource cursed” (Slow Violence 70). This claim contradicts the experience of dispossession shared by Indigenous people across Canada. As Glen Sean Coulthard has argued, Canadian settler-colonialism is “a form of structured dispossession”—of primitive accumulation (7)—that has always been about appropriating land and resources from Indigenous peoples. The Canadian state’s offers of recognition and “reconciliation” for past wrongs attempt to cover over its refusal to return control of the land itself to Indigenous peoples. In her study of a potential “resource curse” on Indigenous peoples affected by the mining of oil sands in northern Alberta, Brenda Parlee takes in such factors as unemployment, lost access to the land and traditional ways of life, and increased rates of cancer and illness. She concludes “that symptoms of the resource curse are present in northern Alberta and felt acutely by Indigenous communities” (434). Souryan Mookerjea writes that “Wood Buffalo, along with much of Alberta, has been living with what scholars of boom-and-bust resource economies call the ‘resource curse’ ever since the oil and gas industry displaced agriculture and forestry over the postwar decades as the primary sector of production in terms of investment and growth” (329). In Saboteurs: Wiebo Ludwig’s War against Big Oil, Andrew Nikiforuk documents something like a resource curse among settlers in the Alberta oil patch, who typically own only the surface rights to their land, and where mineral rights are leased to oil companies by the provincial government. Although landowners are offered some compensation for industry access to their land, they are beset by health problems, unpotable tap water, consistent exposure to toxic chemicals through sour gas venting and flaring, effects of acid rain on crops and trees, unexplained deaths and illness of cattle, foundations broken by seismic testing, and industry and government collusion to deny responsibility for these effects.
bleak scene of contrary infatuation, where the couple endures day-to-day life while imagining “better times, / alternate plans” (28).

Seemingly suffering from PTSD after the war—or perhaps it is the as-yet-undiagnosed brain tumour—the husband is volatile and frightening. In “Rage,” the speaker describes tiptoeing, with her children, around her husband:

I dance nervous butterfly steps, practising shallow breathing and my poker face that hovers somewhere between avoidance and compliance. (26)

The speaker describes a facial expression (a “poker face”) that reminds me of Berlant’s description of a new “recession grimace” of cruel optimism, “a precarious visage . . . somewhere between a frown, a smile, and a tightened lip” (196). For the speaker, the grimace is an expression of the reparative side of contrary infatuation: she stays because she hopes things will get better, because he is her children’s father, and because he is not well. Her “avoidance and / compliance” is the living out of contrary infatuation and disidentification in a domestic situation that has become threatening, if not outright violent. “Rage” ends with the wife’s rage instead of the husband’s. She fantasizes using an oil-fueled vehicle to overpower and escape him:

I imagine driving the bulldozer that finally levels you and clears a path for our escape. (26)

The speed and power afforded by oil, which are used by the loggers to clear land, are seen here as a way of balancing the speaker’s unequal power relations with a man. Here, the speaker seems to be dreaming of oil as an equalizer, or as a promise of something like the “carbon democracy”
discussed by Timothy Mitchell. Yet, as Mitchell shows, oil has been used most effectively to establish and maintain inequality in both global and local regimes of power. Furthermore, the speaker uses the colonial imagery of clearing land with the bulldozer to escape gendered violence. This figures a transferral, rather than a transcendence or resolution, of violence that is inflicted on another victim. This poem raises questions about the costs of the freedoms petromodern citizens gain from oil.

The long poem “Astrocytoma” narrates the speaker’s experience of her husband’s diagnosis of brain cancer—his treatment, surgery, decline, and death. The cancer offers an explanation for the husband’s cruelties, which the speaker can now call insanity, madness, and being “like one possessed by a demon” (56). It also explains why the speaker stays, normalizing the supportive role she plays for her husband and her children during a tragedy. In the impasse before the diagnosis, “I contemplated life without him / and hid my brittle heart” (55), but with the diagnosis comes a renewed attachment of contrary infatuation:

    I must go on.
    my love is not dead yet,
    he and our children
    look to me for laughter
    for strength. (57)

The determination of “I must go on” is a sign of cruel optimism, of adaptation to an unfair and difficult situation. Dronyk’s “my love is not dead yet” line is telling: it refers back to the sense earlier in the poem that the speaker may not be able to love this man, and forward to the next line, which makes him the very embodiment of what “my love” is. Although the speaker describes “a battle scarred husband and wife” (63), she also considers how her love has been scarred and has become contrary infatuation—like her husband, her love is dying, but she maintains it in the state of being “not dead yet.”
The story of an abused woman who stays, optimistically, with her husband becomes the primary image of contrary infatuation in Dronyk’s collection. In this image, Dronyk’s speaker shows both extreme honesty about her contrary infatuation and extreme loyalty to her husband, even though he hurts her. The reader is faced with the dilemma of how to account for the speaker’s behaviour, feeling the tension between cultural values that dictate, contrarily, that no one should stay with an abusive partner and that no one should die alone. Contrary infatuation interpellates the speaker as a woman and caregiver, using the cultural value of “unconditional love” (which Dronyk invokes in her dedication to her husband at the beginning of the book) to make her stay. Later, in “The Patch Poems,” the speaker shows the same kind of loyalty to oil, even as she regrets the harm that oil extraction and consumption do to the land. She wishes her relationship with oil could be different, but she knows it is “not dead yet.”

In the inside back cover of Contrary Infatuations, Dronyk’s bio makes some complicated claims about the relationship between work, necessity, and affect: “Dymphny Dronyk is a writer, artist, mediator and mother. She is passionate about the magic of story and has woven words for money (journalism, corporate writing) and for love (poetry, fiction, drama, mystery novels) for over 25 years.” This paragraph is set off from the subsequent one, which describes her “years of rambling on an eclectic career path (camp cook, editor, waitress, photographer)” and her current focus on her mediation business, as well as raising her children. The two paragraphs together reveal a desire to keep her creative work separate from both her career as a mediator and her role as a mother. There is a desire to delineate what one does for love and what one does for money, but these entities are difficult to keep separate. Instead, love and money become entangled in

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83 Dronyk dedicates the book to “Levi—who taught me that unconditional love is not always a tired old cliché,” a troubling statement in relation to the theme of contrary infatuation. It suggests that the husband taught the wife unconditional love not by showing it but by requiring it of her.
Dronyk’s writing (work she does for both love and money), in her parenting (work she does only for love in an economy that devalues domestic and caring labour but that requires her to earn enough money to care for her children), and in the paid work that she claims not to love. Despite this claim, several of the poems in “The Patch Poems” betray an affective attachment to oil and oil work, a contrary infatuation that resembles, at times, the “unconditional love” the speaker offers to her husband.

In “The Patch Poems,” Dronyk uses the short lines that are consistent throughout the book, but the “Patch Poems” run long, at least one full page each. Their vertical lines recall the action of drilling for oil, with the regular rhythm of slightly longer lines suggesting the movement of a turning drill bit, as in “Drilling Mud”:

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drill bit chews
down into the earth
2000 metres and more
spinning,
spinning,
on the end of the pipe stem
linked like a chain
of giant straws,
disappearing
as more joints
are bolted on[.] (85)
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Inside the concrete form of the poem as oil well, the speaker’s mind spins like the drill bit, following the course set out by her choice of residence and occupation, but always “spinning, / spinning,” chewing on the ethical, social, and ecological concerns that she encounters like so many difficult rock formations along the way. Dronyk’s petropoetics takes in the sexual politics of the oil patch, and the hypocrisies of the oil corporations, resistant landowners, and surface rights negotiators, as well as their common sense of acquiescence to a force they feel powerless to stop. Her speaker represents herself almost as a puppet, manipulated by her employer and
ultimately by oil, yet consenting to be manipulated because it is one way of being honest about her own hypocrisies and complicity. Like a drill bit following its course, she limits her analysis to certain lines of thought.

“Drilling Mud” continues with the contemplation of the mud pulled back up to the surface by the drill bit. Dronyk describes the mud as “ancient,” with a “primordial / scent,” “coarse with prehistoric / rock chips,” and “still warm.” The speaker finds “the warmth / comforting / in my hands” (85). This section reads like a nature poem, evoking earthy images of rock and mud, combined with the smell and feel of bread still warm from the oven, to create a sense of comfort, but the substance that the speaker touches is not just mud. Schlumberger’s Oilfield Glossary defines “drilling mud” as the same as “drilling fluid,” a substance that is put down an oil well to facilitate drilling: “[a]ny of a number of liquid and gaseous fluids and mixtures of fluids and solids (as solid suspensions, mixtures and emulsions of liquids, gases and solids) used in operations to drill boreholes into the earth” (“drilling mud”). The “mud” in the speaker’s hand may contain chemical additives, as well as dangerous and radioactive materials brought up from under the ground. According to WorkSafeBC, there are more than 250 different chemicals that may be used in drilling fluid. They list the following health risks from exposure to drilling fluids: “Dizziness / Headaches / Drowsiness / Nausea / Irritation and inflammation of the respiratory system / Dermatitis / [and] Cancer” (“Drilling Fluids”). Despite these risks associated with drilling mud, it is naturalized (even if it is not natural): roughnecks working on oil rigs are often splashed and even drenched with drilling mud.84 In this poem, Dronyk uncritically adopts a naturalizing logic of the oil industry, taking and offering false comfort in the naturalness of one

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84 See, for example, videos of roughnecks working on YouTube, like tool235’s “Drilling Rig Canada” and sleazyeddy’s “The Roughneck Mudcan.”
aspect of oil production. The speaker demonstrates contrary infatuation here, using affectionate language to describe a substance that could harm her.

Dronyk’s drilling poetic form is also referenced in the content of the poem “Cross Threaded,” which compares a cross threaded drill stem to relationships affected by oil work:

   In the hustle
   of the Boom,
   meetings,
   projects
   and marriages
   are all getting
   cross threaded.
   ....................
   Continual
   cross threading
   strips us
   of connection,
   we spin around,
   no hold left,
   purpose forgotten,
   our hands
   clumsy with cold
   rough with calluses. (86)

Cross threading occurs when joining sections of drill stem are threaded wrong, potentially causing damage to the pieces and threatening the stability of the entire drill stem as well as the safety of oil workers. Dronyk’s use of an industry-based metaphor of coupling draws parallels between intimate human connection and a kind of intimacy with oil. “Cross Threaded” suggests that oil work and the culture of the oil boom are not healthy for human relationships. Being intimate with oil and its infrastructures gives the oil workers “hands / clumsy with cold / rough with calluses”—hands accustomed to doing the difficult and dangerous work of threading lengths of drill stem—that the poem implies are ill suited for human tenderness. The demands on workers during an oil boom take them away from their loved ones and cause conflicts and interpersonal problems on and off the worksite. As oil worker Clint Breeze says,
“The longest I’ve ever worked was 57 hours straight with a two hour nap in the middle. It’s tough. It’s a rough life. The oil doesn’t stop coming out of the ground, it’s got to be tended to” (qtd. in Teicher).

Two kinds of love are in conflict here as contrary infatuation: romantic or family love vs. love of oil (or oil money, or oil work). These two become entangled when it is in order to support their family that an oil worker is overworked and loses connection with them. Even as “Cross Threaded” claims that the boom is bad for marriages, relationships, and even business, and that it is “not just nuts and bolts / and pipe stem” that get cross threaded (86), this poem makes the endeavours of oil extraction and human relationship of the same kind. It demonstrates how oil wells function as complicated and sometimes mixed metaphors in the poetics of “The Patch Poems.” Is the self a drill stem that can be coupled either with oil or with another human, but not successfully with both? This is an unusual suggestion that speaks to contrary infatuation as a condition of doing oil work.

“Cross Threaded” undermines the force and “purpose” of the spinning reflections in the entire series of poems, which make much of the speaker’s relationships with other oil workers. It also makes the optimistic note on which Dronyk ends the collection, with “Love by Cell Phone,” a poem about a long-distance relationship with another worker in the oil industry, ring empty. Although the speaker says

I come to believe
you are always here
in my pocket,
riding beside me[.]

it becomes clear that she and her partner are both on call for oil and that they remain

the go-to people,
the soothers of ego,
the healers of rifts,
as we rush to well sites . . . (91)

Although the cell phone, seemingly a work phone, offers the speaker a more immediate connection with her partner, it exacts a costly price: constant availability to serve the whims and smooth the problems caused by oil. Although the lovers see the cell phone as the means of their connection, it is also a symbol of the cross threading of their relationship with their oil work, a cross threading that Dronyk’s speaker knows is dangerous. The phone and what it does to the speaker show that her coupling with oil is as important as her attachment to her partner. Oil is both her boss and the lover who is always there with her. This intimacy with oil describes not only the life of an oil worker but also the intimacy all petromodern citizens both suffer and enjoy with oil—it is the oil and not the human lover that is “always here.”

**Contrary Infatuation and Extractive Relationship with the Land**

In Dronyk’s nature poems, the speaker contemplates her place in a natural world gridded and marked for ownership, settlement, and industry, with a history of colonialism and resource extraction that she feels mournful about but also removed from. She sees the role of the artist painting an agricultural landscape in “An Artist’s Eye” as chronicling “the dying whispers / of the landscape” along with “our stories” (23)—yet all she can do is appreciate the artist’s skill, rather than try to protect the land. Indigenous people are similarly represented as dying or absent, empty symbols of an alternative to petromodernity and extraction that Dronyk’s speaker rejects. She shows contrary infatuation with settler colonialism and extractivism by being selective about what she is willing to be held responsible for and which entanglements she is willing to admit. Knowingly making a home on stolen land reveals the cruelty that underlies the optimism of the
settler and the settler-colonial state, as well as the speaker’s contrary infatuation with a threatened wilderness whose disappearance she both mourns and hastens.

In “Poetry on Nose Mountain,” the speaker and her friends use “well-site signs” and surveying grids to navigate their way through Peace River Country, off-roadsing on an intensely pleasurable joy ride:

> Our 4 x 4 horsepower
> rips apart the landscape,
> pulls us up the mountain,
> fat tires make glorious rooster trails
> of mud and we whoop in exhilaration. (16)

In this poem that compares the friends’ outdoor pleasures with the struggles and violence of the white “pioneers” who came before them (17), the off-roadsers absolve themselves of responsibility for the colonial appropriation of the land from Indigenous peoples and the extraction of the natural resources that are prerequisites for their pleasure. The speaker continues,

> We are only voyeurs
> to the history that broke this land,
> carved grids into the bush
> and graceful prairie grass,
> tamed the wild
> into some semblance of home. (17)

The speaker claims, weakly, that she and her friends are only having fun, and that the harm they do to the land is negligible, since the harm done by the pioneers who “broke,” “carved,” and “tamed” the wild land is so much worse. The oil-fuelled vehicle grants the friends a sense of distance from the violence of their excursion: it is the vehicle, not the friends, that “rips apart the landscape.” Although the speaker is willing to claim “some semblance of home” in this place, she deflects responsibility for the conditions under which she can make that home, including the reframing of “the wild” as a gridded and surveyed collection of natural resources available for clearing, agriculture, and extraction. She makes a dissociative but not innocent claim to be “only
voyeurs” in relation to “the history that broke this land,” choosing not a more neutral term like observer but rather the image of someone who watches for pleasure (Sontag 42). Yet, a voyeur is less responsible than a perpetrator, or even, in the terms Dronyk will use in relation to oil later in the book, a beneficiary (82). Perhaps Dronyk is using irony here, where her speaker tries to persuade herself that she only watches a violent act that she participates in. This is the dangerous privilege of the settler: to see herself as not responsible for the wrongs that have made it possible for her to have a home on the land, and to see her own participation in ongoing extraction and colonial appropriation as the only available option in a situation not of her making. The poem exposes this as what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang call a “settler move to innocence” of “settler harm reduction” (21), where the conscientization of the settler replaces “the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land” (19). Here and throughout the book, Dronyk represents wilderness and the wild as sacred and necessary for human life, but as receding, dying, and gone. As a lover of wilderness and a worker for industries that drive the frontier to ever more remote locations, Dronyk’s speaker responds with ambivalence, playing the part of the destructive lover in an extractive relationship. The broken, carved land is revealed to be another example of the bruising that signifies contrary infatuation (see, for example, Figure 12, a map of well sites in southwestern Manitoba).
Figure 12. C. Steele, “Well Location Map No. 7,” Manitoba Growth, Enterprise and Trade, Petroleum Branch, 27 Feb. 2019. Used with permission.
The poem “Surface Rights Acquisition—What We Don’t Say” brings contrary infatuation with the land and the wilderness into a tight-lipped discussion of oil and its politics. Based on Dronyk’s experience of doing interest-based negotiation work in the oil industry, this poem describes the delicate position of a mediator who negotiates with landowners on behalf of an oil company. The landowners own only the surface of the land but not the minerals underneath. The oil companies and the provincial government own the mineral rights, but they cannot extract oil or natural gas without gaining access to sites on the surface for drilling wells. They aim to compensate the landowners enough to satisfy them, while also leaving plenty of room for profit for themselves. Governments and corporations claiming mineral rights is an ongoing form of capitalist accumulation that provides access to natural resources as what Jason W. Moore calls “cheap nature” (17). This accumulation follows and builds on the earlier and ongoing appropriation of land from Indigenous peoples, as well as the appropriations inherent to the frontier economies of the fur and lumber trades. Raj Patel and Moore describe frontiers as sites where the cheapness of nature, including human lives, is worked out:

The frontier works only through connection, fixing its failures by siphoning life from elsewhere. A frontier is a site where crises encourage new strategies for profit. Frontiers are frontiers because they are the encounter zones between capital and all kinds of nature—humans included. They are always, then, about reducing the costs of doing business. Capitalism not only has frontiers; it exists only through frontiers, expanding from one place to the next, transforming socioecological relations, producing more and more kinds of goods and services that circulate through an expanding series of exchanges. . . . Capitalism thrives not by destroying natures but by putting natures to work—as cheaply as possible” (18-19)

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85 Surface rights acquisition work is often done by oil and gas industry workers called landmen. The term is used to describe Landmen of any gender. The Canadian Association of Petroleum Landmen, which has six women on its board of directors, uses Landmen in combination with carefully gender-neutral language on its website (landmen.ca) to indicate that women, too, can be landmen (“Who We Are”). Despite its archaic name, Kairn Klieman describes this job as a “venue for women to get into the oil industry.” It draws on the social skills and reproductive labour women have practised in other areas of their experience, including Dronyk’s training as a mediator. Dronyk makes a distinction between her interest-based negotiation work and the work of a landman that I respect in the wording of this chapter (Dronyk, “Re: Inquiry”).
Surface rights negotiations perform accumulation on a resource frontier that was previously claimed for agriculture, where oil wells are “new strategies for profit,” located literally in people’s backyards. In Jennifer Wenzel’s characterization of the “resource aesthetic” of neoliberal extractivism, capital comes back to previous sites of modernization and “improvement” to gather a “second harvest” where it turns out that everything earlier economies had spared (remaining wilderness, as well as communities, towns, and earlier ways of life) turns out to be “overburden after all” (“Improvement”). Putting oil wells on agricultural land is an example of such a “second harvest.” It requires that landowners become vulnerable, taking on not only economic gain but also risk for their land, their bodies, and their families. As I showed in my discussion of “Drilling Mud,” oil wells disrupt earlier delineations of what are natural, cultural, agricultural, and industrial spaces. They make the natural world both subject to extreme domination by humans and visible as a potent, dangerous agency that threatens human and other forms of life.

In this poem, the speaker speaks for surface rights negotiators as a “we,” describing a composite scene based on many conversations with landowners about surface rights:

In farm kitchens
we speak
a careful language
leery of misinterpretation
of precedent,
of territory
and betrayal. (80)

The negotiators must say (and not say) all the right things, must be sympathetic yet firm, must resist the urge to give a sharp retort, even while they are aware of the many unacknowledged ironies and hypocrisies that factor in. Perhaps the most glaring omission is signalled by the words “of territory,” which pass over the history of Indigenous peoples’ prior claim to the land.
Dronyk seldom mentions Indigenous peoples and makes only this glancing mention in this poem, so that I am not sure whether the speaker ignores or mocks the shared settler-colonial privilege that has brought the negotiators and the landowners together. There appears to be no irony in the itemization of “the Crown / and the companies / and the landowner” who “share the rights / to the bounty / of this land” (80) or the failure to consider who shares in return the responsibility to care for or protect the land. The speaker comments instead on a different irony, the fact that the landowners who resist having oil infrastructure on their land are addicted, as the negotiators and all petromodern consumers are, to oil:

        Fuelled by our
        communal addiction
        we recognize that
        we are all
        trapped in our
        insatiable need
        for the oil
        hidden in formations
        deep under
        the fragile surface. (80)

The conversation itself has several fragile surfaces that the negotiators must be careful not to break. One surface is “what we don’t say” about how reliant both parties are on oil; another is the settler-colonial ownership structure upon which the negotiations are based. The speaker sees “greed,” “bad planning,” and “hypocrisy” on all sides—in government, industry, among the landowners, and in the self (81). She also sees the harm being done to the land on behalf of these human stakeholders, none of whom are purely victims or wrongdoers. The Indigenous and nonhuman stakeholders who are affected by the negotiations slip in and out of the speaker’s considerations, but they are not invited to the table.
The speaker imagines what she would say to landowners if only she did not have to be so careful. Her “pithy responses” (81) to a landowner whose house she has already left are rehearsed on the drive back to the office, implicating the self and the landowner together:

\[\text{I saw your big truck} \\
\text{in the yard,} \\
\text{and just now I heard} \\
\text{the purr of your furnace} \\
\text{switching on.}\]

\[\text{Are we not all} \\
\text{benefactors, sir,} \\
\text{sharing the profit} \\
\text{of the Crown,} \\
\text{racing these fast highways} \\
\text{as we take our children} \\
\text{to warm, safe schools? (82)}\]

Not wanting to be in denial of her own complicity in environmental damage, nor to be an ungrateful beneficiary of the comforts and privileges offered by oil, the speaker chooses what seems to her a more ethical position—aligning herself with the oil corporation to try to mitigate the negative effects of extracting oil from the land. Dronyk uses the word *benefactor* here where she seems to mean *beneficiary*. This slip is telling: the speaker sees herself as a beneficiary of the conveniences and comforts of oil culture, yet her job also positions her as a benefactor—as a representative of the oil company’s generosity in offering financial compensation to landowners. In fact, both the landowner and the negotiator are beneficiaries of an earlier acquisition of land through Treaty 8; based on that acquisition, they are positioned as benefactors in relation to dispossessed Indigenous peoples (people who have been denied access, notably, to such benefits as “warm, safe schools”) and the land.

The speaker’s own entanglement in the system is key to the complex spinning of the mind as drill bit that is happening in this poem. Even in a poem like this one, where the speaker is
supposedly drilling down beneath what she can say in a landowner’s kitchen, she sets limits on what she is willing to say. She feels for the landowners—in fact, she is a landowner with oil wells adjacent to her own property—and she knows that both she and the landowners are reliant on and even addicted to oil. The speaker and the negotiators wish for something different,

Our hearts weary,
we dream of a world
spun free of
hydrocarbons
where wild horses
still gallop
in prairie grass. (82)

Yet, such a possibility is foreclosed. As the speaker describes in the preceding poem, “The Legal Survey System,” the land is “no longer wild” (79). It becomes apparent that the speaker (and perhaps the poet) is a purist: the damage is already done, she is already entangled, and she sees no course of action except to try to make the destructive process of oil extraction more humane. The “world / spun free of / hydrocarbons,” perhaps a world in reverse, where the drill bit moves backward out of the earth, is only a dream, not a reality to work for. Furthermore, in this imaginary world, the land belongs to the wild horses, but there is no mention of Indigenous people, no spinning free of settler colonialism and Treaty 8.

In another poem, “Interest-Based Negotiation,” Dronyk recounts a story told to her by a landman—whose job, like Dronyk’s, is to acquire surface rights on behalf of an oil and gas company—about his negotiations with a concerned rancher. The two parties strike a deal,

a minimum impact
middle ground
where the pump jacks
can hypnotically
suck up the oil
on the edge of
her grazing cattle herd,
on the fringe of
the wild meadows. (83)

Although the rancher and the landman have each successfully protected their own interests, including protection for a token “wild” space, the word hypnotically suggests there is some deception involved in the deal, some sense that they are only fooling themselves about the low impact of the well. The poet reports that both parties feel “victorious,” but “their shoulders / slumped / in unison” once the deal is done. As the landman takes his leave, the rancher gives him a gift:

she invites him back
for the branding season,
and puts an arrowhead
she’s found along
the proposed pipeline route,
in his palm,
where it lies
with the weight
of 20,000 years. (84)

This is a moment of exchange between two seeming benefactors, but the exchange of the arrowhead as a talisman or a symbol of shared responsibility to the land points to the illegitimacy of the settler’s and the oil company’s claim to own the land and to know what is best for it. “The weight / of 20,000 years” is the weight of the knowledge that Indigenous people lived for thousands of years on land that settler-colonial capitalism has taken mere decades to degrade and spoil.

Dronyk’s speaker’s belated words about complicity in “Surface Rights Acquisition—What We Don’t Say” bloom like a bruise at the end of the poem. Seemingly addressed to a nondescript landowner (an amalgam of all the landowners Dronyk has sat with at kitchen tables), I suspect that the references to the “big truck / in the yard,” the purring furnace, and the children are also addressed to Wiebo Ludwig, with whom Dronyk had some uncomfortable and even threatening
encounters—at first because Ludwig saw her as a potential new member for his community, and later because he judged her for working in the oil industry (see Blatchford). Ludwig’s conflicting narratives of sour gas victimhood, ecological purity, liberation through patriarchal religious life, and social justice through ecoterrorism chafed Dronyk and other members of her community. In an interview with the National Post in 2000, after she had moved away from Hythe, Dronyk says, “All they say is, ‘The land is poisoned, the land is poisoned, the land is poisoned.’ Then they offer you honey or butter from the land. And I say, ‘How is that honey not poisoned? How is that butter not poisoned?’ Why does no one pick up on that?” (Blatchford B1).

An unspoken concern in Dronyk’s poetry is that whatever she says or does about the problem of climate change should not make her as false as Ludwig. She sees the hypocrisy in the difference between what Ludwig and his followers said and what they did; to avoid embodying a similar hypocrisy, Dronyk chooses in her poetry not to say anything, to half say, or to gesture at “what we don’t say” when it comes to oil. The unspoken is transferred into the many metaphors for contrary infatuation that I highlight here. Although Dronyk represents Trickle Creek’s relationship with sour gas as something different from her own relationship, it also fits the pattern of contrary infatuation. Dronyk and her speaker assume that the land is poisoned, that we are all active participants in the poisoning, and therefore that we can have no ethical ground on which to say anything about it. Yet, the choice of what Alexis Shotwell calls a “purity politics” that assumes the only ethical position out of which to act is an imagined place outside of contamination (7) does little to help get us out of an impasse.

86 For example, once Dronyk found herself on the bad side of her neighbours at Trickle Creek, her vehicle (which the men from Trickle Creek said was bought with “blood money”) was frequently sabotaged. She had countless flat tires caused by sharp objects like drywall screws (Ludwig and his sons were drywallers). As a single mother in her isolated rural home and at the remote well sites she drove to for work, Dronyk needed her vehicle to be reliable (Blatchford B1).
In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh argues against the use of sincerity or purity to determine the integrity of climate change activists (where pointing out an activist’s oil consumption is enough to discredit them). He contends that this kind of thinking is so effective at shutting down dissent because it focuses on how we are all implicated in the system of oil production and consumption rather than looking for how to change the system (133). Making oil consumption a personal problem, rather than a societal one, prevents us from working for much-needed large-scale and policy-level change. Ghosh argues that we need to “find a way out of the individualizing imaginary in which we are trapped” (135), since the problem of climate change requires broad collaboration and imagination.

One way out of individualistic thought and action that Ghosh recommends is to correct for the failure of human and literary imagination to recognize “the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors” (30). Ghosh suggests that we consider the earth as an agent in climate change—an intervener (31), a literary critic (“that sly critic, the Anthropocene” [80]), and an interlocutor that is “thinking ‘through’ us,” like a forest thinks (83). In Shotwell’s position “against purity,” this means accepting that we are “co-constituted with the world, ontologically inseparable” (7). She proposes “thinking about complicity and compromise as a starting point for action” (5). This agrees with Berlant’s argument that since we are more likely to entangle ourselves with the potentially harmful objects of cruel optimism than to struggle seemingly futilely against them, political action against cruel optimism will arise out of entanglement, not a clear separation of good and bad objects—nor, I add, of humans and the things they can control. To pay attention to her nonhuman interlocutors, the mediator might picture herself at the kitchen table with the earth, striving on behalf of complicit humans (not an oil corporation) for a collective integrity in relationship to fossil fuels and the earth rather than to our common failures.
Oil figures as an interlocutor in “Perforating,” which describes the experience of standing near an oil well that is being perforated by a geologist and wireline crew using a perf gun. The gun is a tool sent down the well that sets off controlled explosions in the rock formations below the speaker’s feet,

exact explosions
a kilometre or two
beneath us,
cracks that will
allow the gas
to migrate just so,
or the oil to seep
into our well bore. (87)

Perforation of a well may work to increase oil or gas production on its own, or it may be a first step before water is injected into the well to further break up the rock formation in a process known as hydraulic fracturing or fracking. This is a four-stanza poem, with the first three stanzas focusing on the human and nonhuman agents who come together to perforate the well: first come the “tight / rock formations / ... rich in oil and gas” that “lumber” underground in the first stanza; next, the talkative geologist who refers to the formations “as if he’s gossiping / about old friends,” and “the wireline crew” in the second stanza; the speaker watches from a distance in the third stanza while

the consultant
bows close
to check
the perf gun
before it
bullets
down hole. (87)

The poem “Perforating” is very literal (as in the perf gun that “bullets” down the well). It uses the same style of short, plain well-bore lines as the other “Patch Poems,” but this poem has a surprising closing stanza that perforates the meaning of this and the other oil poems.
The forth stanza reads,

None of us
breathe
at the moment
of detonation,
wait for
the shockwave
of energy
to rock us. (88)

With the rock deep underground being broken, Dronyk makes use of her short-line form to figure a relationship with the earth as rock, and as natural gas. As in V.A. De Luca’s description of the sublime according to William Blake, this is a moment of *astonishment*—which literally means “thunderstruck” (101) but is also associated (through sound) with being turned to stone—the moment in which “one becomes what one beholds” (102). The slow pace of the broken phrases recalls poet Don McKay’s description of astonishment as being “turned toward stone, the moment / filling with its slow / stratified time” (*Strike/Slip* 3). The astonished person wonders, are they “thinking / or being thought?” (3), and Dronyk’s speaker expresses a version of sublime astonishment as being filled or taken over by the rock.

The line “None of us,” which suspends the verb that will come in the next line, refers to no one, doing nothing—and to none of the humans above the ground described thus far. The reader’s mind goes underground, to where the rock is both “None of us” and “one of us,” and this carries over into the next line, when “None of us / breathe.” While the workers perforating the well hold their breath in anticipation, they imitate the rock and the natural gas deep under the surface. The “us” stays in this expanded form for the lines that follow, so that I wonder, what is the “moment / of detonation” to the rock? We are accustomed to thinking of detonation and perforating as something humans do to rock, so that “the shockwave / of energy” is just one more action emanating from Anthropocene humans. But this poem shows that the transfer of energy is
more complex both because the humans are removed (by technology, and by the layers of earth and rock) from the moment and the place of detonation and because the detonation involves the rock. It suggests that the energy also belongs to the rock, to the earth, and to the gas that is released by perforating the well. Who sends the shockwave? Who makes the natural gas? Who owns it? These questions arise in the slow reading. And if the reader is inclined to attribute all of the perforating agency to the humans, the final line shifts the balance again toward the rock. The energy that comes in a wave is not, as it turns out, for us to use: it is energy “to rock us.” The earth shakes from the detonation. The ground rocks beneath the speaker, the geologist, and the other oil workers above the ground. This line suggests that when we harm the earth, it responds; it also points to the ways that the human world has been altered by close relationship with fossil fuels—it may, astonishingly, be more “being thought” than “thinking.”

Like the American subjects Bob Johnson discusses in *Carbon Nation*, Canadians too have become “people of prehistoric carbon” (3) through the processes that tie industrialization and modernity not only to the consumption but also to the embodiment of fossil fuels. Johnson writes,

> If we are to fully unpack the historical specificity of the modern self, then that means reckoning with the fact that the world that we now carry inside of us is a world of prehistoric carbon in which our suffering and eroticism, our nervousness and our bombast are at least in part produced by this absorption of fossil fuels into our muscles, memories, and instincts. (74)

As Johnson suggests, we have all already been rocked, or have become rock, while we have been busy exerting the geological force that the theory of the Anthropocene attributes to humans, assuming the action goes only one way. After all, we are so comfortable in our relationship with oil that it also rocks us like restless infants, lulling us back into complacency and comfort. Considering oil as a “witty agent” rather than merely a tool in human hands (Haraway, “Situated
Knowledges” 199), both climate change and its denial may be ways in which we have been rocked. In “Geologic Life: Prehistory, Climate, Futures in the Anthropocene,” geographer Kathryn Yusoff considers the naming of the geologic epoch of the Anthropocene as “a provocation to begin to understand ourselves as geologic subjects, not only capable of geomorphic acts, but as beings who have something in common with the geologic forces that are mobilised and incorporated” (”Geologic” 781). She describes a “collaborative project” between humans and minerals (781) that has produced not only modernity, capitalism, and climate change but also “the geopolitical subject of late capitalism” (791), a subject who has received “gifts” from fossil fuels (791), and who must account for their responsibilities, their practices, and their very being in relation to “geologic life” (780). Yusoff writes,

Contemporary Anthropocene subjectivity (human and otherwise) is not indivisible from fossil fuels, so to think of a futurity without fossil fuels and the proffered ending of the Anthropocene requires undoing forms of becoming that are coconstituted with fossil fuels as much as reconstituting alternative energetic materialities. It requires the formation of new collective subjectivities and material forms of life that examine and then move on from the geopolitical inheritance of the Anthropocene. The matter under consideration—fossil fuels—is not outside of life; it has agency, and directs, forms, and differentiates the geologic subjects of the Anthropocene. (792)

Yusoff’s framing of the relationship between humans and fossil fuels figures it as another example of problematic or bad love, a love that goes both ways and that demands “[examination] and then [moving] on” rather than only disavowal.

The astonishing insight of “Perforating” is that rock has been speaking through us for centuries of escalating fossil fuel consumption. This is a case for thinking of the era we live in as petromodern, and even of ourselves as petrohuman, neither fully controlling nor fully comprehending the plans in store for us in what McKay calls “the momentary mind of rock” (Strike/Slip 4). My reading of “Perforating” shows how the rock and the natural gas perforate the suite of poems collected in “The Patch Poems,” saying more than what Dronyk seems to intend.
The fossil-fuel speech that enters into “Perforating” addresses the “geologic life” of contrary infatuation. “Perforating” indicates that ethical action in impasse cannot be about being consistent with human action that has already been rocked by oil. It shows that humans are not only responsible to one another, but also to the rock, to the oil and to earth, which is not only a set of resources available for us to use but also our habitat and our mother.

Contrary Infatuation and Reproductive Labour

In poems like “Cross Threaded” and “Surface Rights Acquisition—What We Don’t Say,” the speaker does soothing, healing, but also bruising work on behalf of the oil industry. Dronyky’s broader theorization of contrary infatuation includes an analysis of the role that reproductive labour plays in sustaining the industry, the economy, and petromodernity. The poetry shows that contrary infatuation is always at work in reproductive labour.

Berlant’s analysis of reproduction in Cruel Optimism focuses on the ways in which we all do reproductive labour to reproduce the conditions for living on in impasse—that is, we reproduce the relations of cruel optimism as well as the ideologies that keep those relations in place. In contrast, Contrary Infatuations performs a gender-based analysis of reproductive labour that is in keeping with autonomist feminist Marxist Silvia Federici’s work on reproductive labour. Federici argues in Caliban and the Witch that women’s unpaid and underpaid emotional, homemaking, gardening, child-rearing, sexual, and caregiving labour has long been a source of surplus value in capitalism. Contradicting Marx, Federici describes primitive accumulation as ongoing in capitalism through the continued appropriation of women’s labour alongside other seemingly free resources, beginning with the transition from feudalism and extending to the present day. She writes, tying the extraction of natural resources and of women’s labour, that
“once women’s activities were defined as non-work, women’s labor began to appear as a natural resource, available to all, no less than the air we breathe or the water we drink” (97). For Federici, the “Unfinished Feminist Revolution,” a revolution that is also fundamentally anticapitalist, must address the fact that our economic system both thrives on and refuses to account for reproductive labour (see “Reproduction”).

American poet Adrienne Rich uses an anecdote to highlight how reproductive labour is appropriated: “‘Vous travaillez pour l’armée, madame?’ (You are working for the army?), a Frenchwoman said to me early in the Vietnam war, on hearing I had three sons” (11). A woman’s reproductive labour, intended to care for someone she loves (her sons) can be appropriated for purposes that are contrary to her own (the war). Sheena Wilson’s film Petro-Mama: Mothering in a Crude World explores the ways in which petromodernity appropriates her reproductive labour. Like both Rich and Wilson, Dronyk’s speaker does reproductive labour that is appropriated by the military, the natural resource industries of forestry and oil, and oil itself.

Canadian work poet Tom Wayman is the first person Dronyk thanks in her acknowledgements at the beginning of Contrary Infatuations: “He taught me that poetry about work is honourable and unknowingly saved my life.” This reference frames Dronyk’s book as a collection of work poetry, a wide-ranging one that takes in her paid and unpaid labour in roles that Wayman outlines in his endorsement on the back cover: “caregiver to the terminally ill, widow, single-parent, employee in the primary resource industries of forestry and oil.” Wayman has long understood all kinds of labour to fit within his conception of “the new, insider’s, work writing” as poetry written from an insider’s perspective about a particular job (“Work and Silence” 79). When Dronyk positions her entire poetry collection as work poetry, she makes a claim for the importance of reproductive or caring labour as labour by suggesting that even the
poems about apple picking, sex, raising children, and caring for a dying husband are work poetry. Wayman picks up on the significance of this claim but misses its gender dynamics in his gender-neutral description of the jobs Dronyk writes about as caregiver, widow, parent, and employee. In contrast, Dronyk’s gendered word choices, like “Cookie, / wet-nurse” (36), “Madonna” (37), and mother (76), emphasize that reproductive labour is often feminized. Dronyk’s poems demonstrate the ways in which she is interpellated in every work environment and everywhere she goes, because she is a woman, to do unpaid or underpaid reproductive labour.

The “Camp Cook, Tree Planting Poems” sequence contrasts the speaker’s frenzied and stressful work as a cook for tree planters with the planters’ image of her as “Madonna”:

When they see me  
everything is organized.  
Terror shoved in the oven;  
panic stuffed in a pot;  
crumbs of despair  
wiped off an immaculate counter. (36)

The “immaculate counter” and organized kitchen, site of the cook’s work, show that she allows both her food and her caring labour to appear as immaculate conceptions, though they are actually produced under difficult conditions (“Camp does not have power / running water, mixer, / fridge, telephone, / dishwasher or microwave” [35]). The speaker does not want the tree planters to see how she really feels—exhausted, stressed, despairing, “crying into the soup” (37)— because she knows her food is what “[carries] them through / these raw, primal days” (40). Although she does not necessarily love them back, she understands the workers’ need to feel that someone cares that they are cold, wet, tired, and smelly. She understands her role as reproducing the workforce: she has been hired “to provide sustenance” in more than only a nutritional sense (35). The camp cook demonstrates the resourcefulness and creativity of a
reproductive labourer whose job is to sustain life, even when the work is gruelling and practically impossible.

Despite its earthy reputation as “the Mother Teresa of summer jobs” (Gill 215) and as a rite of passage for adventurous, middle-class Canadian college and university students, tree planting is paid reproductive labour for an extractive industry. In her book *Eating Dirt*, veteran planter Charlotte Gill reveals tree planters’ bleak awareness of their reproductive role: “As tree planters, we are simple, monotasking professionals, purveyors of visually effective green-up, or VEG, as industry calls it for short. We provide raw materials for people who’ve not yet been born” (95). Gill represents a knowing dark humour in the tree planters’ banter as they traverse the blighted landscapes of commodity capitalism: “Keep on truckin’, everyone. Crank out more Kleenex, more Starbucks cups, more IKEA coffee tables. By all means, please, mow down the planet. World, we’ve got you covered” (32). Tree planting is a form of greenwashing, giving legitimacy to an industry by replacing the natural resources it extracted, while enabling ongoing overconsumption and waste on the part of consumers of paper, furniture, building materials, etc. The environmentalism of the tree planter is an example of contrary infatuation: in the name of conservation but really to earn money for themselves and to fulfill a legal requirement on behalf of logging companies that have clear-cut mature and sometimes old-growth trees, tree planters replant forests, seemingly repairing the damage done to the ecosystem through logging. Surely, no one understands the contrary infatuation of tree planting better than the tree planters themselves, who must drive themselves to work hard and quickly in difficult conditions, since they are usually paid by the tree. Tree planters are not innocent: Gill writes, “[w]e’re the guilty survivors. Not of the disaster, but next to it. The people to the left of the environmental crime” (146). The camp cook, and later the surface rights mediator, finds herself in a similar position.
The cook protects her motherly persona, not wanting the tree planters to see a truth that, according to Gill, many planters readily admit: she does this work not for love but for money, with “greed shackling [her] / to the stove / with green paper chains” (37). She also protects the idea that she alone has “an ‘easy’ job” (36)—that the company has hired her, in part, to listen to the planters’ troubles, apply Band-Aids, and offer hugs—when in fact both the tree planters and her employer are appropriating the speaker’s affective labour on top of her already demanding job. A web of relations of contrary infatuation ties the planters, the cook, and the logging industry together, twisting and repurposing feelings of love for nature, care for one another, and economic necessity to continue greenwashing their reasons for coming together. Producing culinary masterpieces in bush conditions, the cook’s work might seem to prefigure the creativity and imagination that energy humanities scholars see as resources for energy transition (see Ghosh, Derangement 128; Graeme Macdonald, “Improbability”; After Oil 73). Yet, her labour also points to the problems that reproductive labour and the “Unfinished Feminist Revolution” pose for energy transition. My poetry collection Happiness Threads: The Unborn Poems critiques the dynamic through which “green” lifestyle choices (such as cloth diapering, walking rather than driving, sourcing local and organic food, and hanging laundry to dry) increase the reproductive workload that is still disproportionately borne by women. The Petrocultures Research Group writes that “[a]n enormous opportunity will be wasted if energy transition isn’t accompanied by an equally impressive social transition—one that allows our energy resources to enrich our lives, rather than exhaustively amplify our activities only to generate profit” (After Oil 70-71). Such a social transition must include valuing and sharing reproductive labour differently.

“The Patch Poems” continue the analysis of reproductive labour as contrary infatuation. A major theme of the oil poems is the question not only of what it is like to be an oil worker but
also to be, as one of the “Patch Poems” describes, “The Only Girl at the Rig” (77). In “Separating the Men from the Girls,” the speaker comments on both the dearth of women working in the oil industry and the unique role that she plays as a woman oil worker. The poem begins with the claim that “women don’t exist” in the oil patch—unless you count “the naked ones / on the rig shack walls.” Instead of woman, the speaker is called “girl,” even by her boss:

  “Don’t worry about it, I’ll send out my little girl to handle the pissed off farmer.”
  my boss assures his boss, both relieved they don’t have to sit in that kitchen themselves. (75)

Although a woman’s presence may be so unusual and so threatening in the offices and well sites of oil corporations that she must be infantilized, a woman employee is also an asset: she is valuable for her competence at doing the reproductive labour of the oil patch—the emotional, feminine work that happens, after all, at kitchen tables turned into negotiating tables.

The “girl” is sent to negotiate surface rights with farmers who own the top portion of the land but not the mineral rights. She helps the oil industry access more oil by listening to landowners, showing care for them, and performing understanding for their concerns. She offers financial as well as emotional compensation to landowners who have little choice but to share their living space with oil infrastructure. In this poem, “The Only Girl at the Rig” recognizes her place in a network of other women connected with the oil industry. Women do reproductive labour for the oil industry that includes the sex work represented by the “pin-up girls / on the wall” (Dronyk 77), as well as the work done by women who cook and clean for the oil workers, entertain them, and raise their children. This network of reproductive labour that is often unpaid,
underpaid, precarious, or dangerous offers the workers the sustenance, satisfaction, and motivation to go to work—it reproduces the workforce. A mediator and writer working in the oil industry may be among the most privileged reproductive labourers, but she is one too. She is qualified to do her work in part because of her gender. She is skilled at listening, compromising, and making sacrifices. She demonstrates these skills both in her interactions with landowners and by acting as a mother figure to the male oil workers, “becoming more motherly / and bossy as time goes on” (76). She balances out her own reduction to girlhood by calling the other workers “my boys.” She tells them to “watch your mouth!” and asks the right questions when they need her to, so that their “sad story spills”[—like oil—]“into the mud” (76). She may also be qualified to do this job because she is familiar with the gendered conditions of contrary infatuation, since her work appears to be caring labour but results in environmentally destructive sour gas extraction that puts pregnant women in particular at risk (of miscarriage and stillbirth, among other health problems). The reproductive threat of sour gas wells, a topic Dronyk must have covered in the safety manuals she wrote for residents of the oil patch, does not come up in “The Patch Poems.”

The “girl” is hired to feel and to have a conscience instead of the corporation. Yet, her feeling is meant to extend only so far, since she must continue to convince residents to allow oil development on their land. Reproductive labour done in service of the oil industry is contrary infatuation because it combines, contrarily, care for the interests of the oil companies with concern for the health and welfare of oil-patch residents. Furthermore, it entangles the speaker in the impasse it signals through economic necessity: she lives in the oil patch, and she needs this job to take care of her own children. “Separating the Men from the Girls” concludes with trite phrases about the effect of a woman working in the oil industry:
My presence loosens the code
softens the worksite,
and somehow
we all adjust. (76)

The speaker seems to accept her role as “girl,” mother, and confidante to the male oil workers and as compassionate negotiator on behalf of the company. Jaremko characterizes this softening, feminine presence as inherently positive (“The Only Girl”), yet the poem also suggests the possibility that the woman is not changing the culture of the oil patch. Instead, by being an emotional support to the male workers who “spill” out their hardships to her, and by doing the emotional work of acquiring new sources of oil, she may merely be reproducing the system of the extraction and consumption of oil. Rather than a positive change within the oil industry, adjustment may instead describe the speaker’s adaptation to the relations of contrary infatuation that have her doing reproductive labour for oil.

Dronyk’s poems about reproductive labour show that the work of petromodernity implicates us not only through complicity but also through more positive feelings of attachment and care, such as the speaker’s motherly care for her “boys.” The poem “Mistakes,” about a moment of reproductive choice, demonstrates the difficulty of detaching from a problematic object. Ending with a line that refers to “the change in the weather,” this poem can be read as a complex metaphor for the reproductive and affective labour that will be involved in energy transition. The poem begins, “I feel its heart beating / now through the / wrenching of my own pain[,]” with a present-tense statement that implies that the painful feeling lasts beyond the past-tense narration of the rest of the poem, which ends (but clearly does not end) with a nurse making cheery comments about the weather. This movement between past and present tense narration gives the poem a circular structure that loops and repeats the speaker’s traumatic experience. The speaker expresses no ambivalence about her decision to have an abortion:
neither this nor her painful feelings about it is among the “mistakes” referenced in the title. Instead, she attributes the mistakes to an implied them, to doctors and nurses at the hospital or clinic where the anaesthetic does not work and the speaker bleeds for days afterward: “They didn’t believe me” . . . “They only made mistakes” . . . “They told me I’d forget” (15). The mistakes seem to be both mistakes made in the procedure and the mistake that they neither understand how the speaker feels nor know how to respond. Contrary infatuation is an appropriate name for the feeling that the speaker insists that she feels in “Mistakes”: it acknowledges both the entanglement of the speaker and the fetus and the pain of separation, even if that separation is necessary.

Stephanie LeMenager has proposed the term “petromelancholia” for the feeling of loss that comes with the end of the age of oil (16). It has us feeling the pain of separation from the freedoms afforded by oil, the speeds we have travelled at, the lifestyles oil has enabled, and even the smell of gasoline. Despite the harms done by fossil fuel consumption, we feel pain at the separation from oil as a way of life and as a beloved object of cruel optimism. We vacillate between seeing oil as a bad object we can easily detach ourselves from and continuing to consume it, compulsively and adoringly (going on vacations, heating our homes, attending conferences on climate change, and so on), and also continuing to work for it, doing reproductive labour on its behalf. A petromelancholic, contrarily infatuated, and cruelly optimistic notion of impasse resists leaping too quickly to the hopeful side of impasse. It suggests that there is some usefulness in feeling its pain and despair, because denying our material and affective attachments with oil would only lead to a new relation of contrary infatuation with an imagined better world without fossil fuels. “Mistakes” makes an argument for “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, Staying), rather than making the mistakes of denying it and trying to move past it too quickly.
Conclusion

The affective map of contrary infatuations is like the maps Dronyk has used in her work for the oil industry, maps like the ones I have struggled to decipher in my own research on oil extraction in my province (see Figure 12 [above] and Figure 13).

![Figure 13. Closeup of C. Steele, “Well Location Map No. 7,” Manitoba Growth, Enterprise and Trade, Petroleum Branch, 27 Feb. 2019. Used with permission.](image)

The land is divided into the neat grid of township and range, with each oil well marked with its own dot. Individually, the impact of each dot seems small, even if we account for many wells’ extended reach underground through horizontal drilling, shown by a line that ends with an X. When combined, however, these small bruises add up to the dark patches of natural gas fields. Similarly, Dronyk’s book is divided into individual poems, images, and experiences that may seem insignificant on their own, yet the bruising of contrary infatuation can be identified as a
pattern that blooms across her life. Just as Dronyk has learned to read the land so well that she can easily locate

   each well-site
   pump jack,
   pipeline,
   riser[,] (78)

she learns to recognize sites of contrary infatuation across the map of her life, marking them with a poem like a dot, or a bruise. She marks them as guides and resources for living on in a world characterized by contrary infatuation, or as notes toward a resistant positioning to come. Like interacting with the GIS maps produced by the Manitoba Petroleum Branch, someone looking at Dronyk’s affective map might zoom in to see individual and unrelated experiences—merely personal and unconnected occurrences in the life of one woman, mother, and oil worker; or they might consider the “field” of Dronyk’s contrary infatuations without linking it to other, related fields in the experiences of other petromodern, geological subjects. Looking more widely reveals that the sites of contrary infatuation are related, and that they invite readers to enter into a solidarity formed through the recognition of the way contrary infatuation has structured all of our lives. A theory and practice of mapping contrary infatuations registers instances and images of a life rocked by oil, as well as a range of possible responses to the impasse of contrary infatuation.

Contrary Infatuations maps what an oil worker already knows is wrong with oil work, petromodernity, settler colonialism, and the patriarchal and extractive appropriations of reproductive labour. Through her poetry, Dronyk theorizes the structure of feeling of contrary infatuation as an affective quality of petromodern life. Although she has used her sense that she is always already complicit to justify her work for the oil industry, Dronyk’s theory also suggests that recognizing contrary infatuation can lead to resistance and solidarity. In particular, Contrary Infatuation prefigures solidarity among and between bruised oil workers, women, Indigenous
people, settlers, and animate land. Changing the extractive relations that work through contrary infatuation must involve not only an energy transition but also a social and geopolitical transformation that addresses the appropriation of the labour and the cheapening of the lives of the human and inhuman beings who are still denied agency in the discourses of the economy, the nation, and the Anthropocene. Like Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* and LeMenager’s conception of living oil as loving oil, the thinking-as-feeling sparked by contrary infatuation recommends that we work our way through rather than around the conditions and entanglements of impasse.
Chapter 4: Endangered, Endangering, Enslaved?
The Energy Slave in Lesley Battler’s *Endangered Hydrocarbons* and Naden Parkin’s *A Relationship with Truth*

In our efforts at “materializing the ecologies of modernity” (LeMenager 184), energy humanists and cultural critics grasp for effective images and metaphors for oil dependency, overconsumption, climate change, and energy transition. In this chapter, I read two recent collections written by oil workers as engagements with the ecological metaphor of the “energy slave,” as used by Andrew Nikiforuk in *The Energy of Slaves: Oil and the New Servitude*. Lesley Battler’s *Endangered Hydrocarbons* critiques the metaphor of the energy slave through the playful, parodic, absurd, and serious suggestion that hydrocarbons are trapped, endangered, and enslaved. Battler mixes, splices, and fractionates oil-industry language to expose and undermine an extractivist logic that links supposedly inanimate hydrocarbons with enslaved and colonized humans. In *A Relationship with Truth*, Naden Parkin uses the metaphor of the energy slave to convey the suffering of an oil worker who feels trapped in his class position and his extractive job. His use of the experiences of enslaved and dispossessed people as images for his own pain makes him uncomfortable, however, and leads to a sense that his class politics must involve a decolonial redefinition of what it means to live well and live responsibly on the land.

Slavery is not only a metaphor but also denotes historical and ongoing practices of enslavement, dehumanization, and environmental racism. Poetry about oil work as hydrocarbon and human slavery reveals that there are indeed links to be made between slavery, oil work, and climate change, but that we must make them without further dehumanizing the enslaved and their descendants, including Black and Indigenous people, within the context of a decolonial, anti-racist, and worker-friendly vision for energy transition.
The Energy of Slaves

In *The Energy of Slaves: Oil and the New Servitude* (2012), Andrew Nikiforuk argues that contemporary Western societies are structured by the same opulence and overconsumption of resources that characterized the slaveholding societies of the Roman empire and antebellum America. He observes that slavery was abolished in tandem with the escalation of fossil-fuel consumption, with hydrocarbons and the machines they fuel supplying the surplus energy to propel ongoing industrialization, large-scale agriculture, and modernization. He writes, “[t]he values of one energy system have been neatly imposed on the other” (70). Nikiforuk adopts a term first used by Buckminster Fuller in the 1940s, *energy slave*, to quantify the extent of North American dependence on fossil fuels (68). Comparing the relative capacities of hydrocarbons and human bodies to do work, Nikiforuk calculates, “[g]iven that the average North American now consumes 23.6 barrels of oil a year, every citizen employs about 89 virtual slaves. A family of 5 commands nearly 500 slaves. A nation of 300 million controls an incredible phalanx of 27 billion largely mechanical and oil-fed workers” (65).

Bob Johnson writes that the discourse of the energy slave has an “uncomfortable racial, class, and gender unconscious” (“Energy Slave” 963), and Nikiforuk’s use of slavery as a metaphor is for the most part indifferent to this dynamic, exacerbating the discomfort by ignoring it or joking about it. Nikiforuk mixes and plays carelessly with the metaphor of the energy slave, for instance, when he writes, “The ubiquity of energy slaves in the United States

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87 There is no acknowledgment of Leonard Cohen’s 1972 poetry collection *The Energy of Slaves* in Nikiforuk’s book of the same name. A reading of these texts together would be fascinating but is not undertaken here.

88 In “Energy Slave: Carbon Technologies, Climate Change, and the Stratified History of the Fossil Economy,” Bob Johnson tracks the history of the terms *mechanical slave* and *mechanical servant* (957; 960), then *the electric servant* in the early twentieth century (957) and eventually the *energy slave*, beginning with Buckminster Fuller in 1940 and extending to a proliferation of writing on the energy slave in the early twenty-first century.
today would surely astound Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The United States traded in an energy system that shackled Topsy, Sambo, and Eliza for one that enslaves consumers to Hummers, Lincolns, and Fords” (66). Nikiforuk fails to acknowledge that his equation of human slavery with the servitude of a petrocitizen to their car, as well as his suggestion that the abolition of slavery turns out not to have made a real improvement, are more astounding than the continuity that he first set out to demonstrate between human slavery and the harnessing and overconsumption of fossil fuels. His flippant references to enslaved literary characters as having been replaced by energy slaves also obscures the persistence of human slavery, racism, and white supremacy today. In a lecture titled “Slave Talk: Between Metaphor and Reality,” Wole Soyinka observes that when considering the use of slavery as a metaphor, “we’re bound to concede that, lurking in the background, springing to the foreground, is the very real issue, this possibility, that the slave condition is unfinished business.” Soyinka points out that slavery persists in the present not only as residual trauma and displacement, as persistent discrimination against the descendants of enslaved people and other people of colour, as the persistence of the relations and economics of slavery, and as a metaphor—although all of these things are significant—but also as actual slavery today. There are more than 40 million enslaved people around the world today (*Global Estimates*),89 and slavery is alive and well, not only historical and not only a metaphor. The metaphor of the energy slave is potent, but it can also be obfuscating, unnuanced, and appropriative, especially in its simultaneous calling up and erasure of historical and ongoing human slavery, as well as other forms of domination and exploitation.

89 A joint report of the International Labour Office and the Walk Free Foundation estimates, conservatively, that 40.3 million people were enslaved in 2016 (*Global Estimates* 7). For the first time, their estimate includes figures for forced marriage as a form of enslavement (15.4 million people) alongside other forms of forced labour (24.9 million people) (7-8).
In an interview for the CBC radio program *The Current*, Nikiforuk disagrees with Jim Brown’s suggestion that the metaphor of the energy slave is “a bit of a stretch.” He justifies his use of the metaphor by saying that overconsumption and climate change are “huge moral issues,” implying that they merit comparison with the “huge moral [issue]” of slavery. Anita Girvan also uses the language of morality to explore the potential usefulness of this problematic metaphor: referring to Nikiforuk’s *The Energy of Slaves*, she comments, “the sheer muscle involved in bringing ‘slavery’ and ‘energy’ together in this metaphor makes one ask what do these two entities have in common? And how might the moral baggage that accompanies the notion of slavery come to morally charge public conversations on contemporary fossil fuel-enabled energy slave regimes?” (193; emphasis in original). In her study of *Carbon Footprints as Cultural-Ecological Metaphors*, Girvan rejects the idea that we just need to find the right metaphors to spur action on climate change: “ecological metaphors” (47) are always shifty, unpredictable, and multivalent, and she sees the ambiguous “who/what/how” of metaphors as registers of nonhuman agency (40). She considers the stretch of the energy slave metaphor as potentially useful: it can help us consider race, class, and nonhuman agency together with energy, power, and climate change.

Other scholars have traced links between slavery and energy while either using the metaphor more cautiously than Nikiforuk (see Johnson, “Energy Slave”; Mouhout) or not using it at all (see Lennon; Mirzoeff; Yusoff, *Billion*). For example, in an article titled “Past Connections and Present Similarities in Slave Ownership and Fossil Fuel Usage,” Jean-François Mouhout addresses the uncomfortable aspects of the energy slave metaphor when he argues, The human exploitation and suffering resulting (directly) from slavery and (indirectly) from the excessive burning of fossil fuels are now morally comparable, even though they operate in a different way. We now know that when we burn oil or gas above what the ecosystem can absorb or when we are depleting non renewable resources for leisure,
we are indirectly causing suffering to other human beings, today and in the future. Similarly, cheap fossil fuels facilitate imports of goods produced in countries with little or no social protection and hence help externalise labour and perpetuate slave-like conditions. (340)

In “Decolonizing Energy: Black Lives Matter and Technoscientific Expertise Amid Solar Transitions,” Myles Lennon shows that the modern energy system is modelled on the energy regimes of the transatlantic slave trade and American slavery, where enslaved people were considered by their enslavers to be less than human, and energy could be considered as an abstract concept (“a lifeless thing in the debased realm of matter” [25]). Lennon uses Black Lives Matter principles to argue that we need not only an energy transition but also a decolonization of energy. Nicholas Mirzoeff argues in “It’s Not the Anthropocene, It’s the White Supremacy Scene” that the naming of the Anthropocene is inherently white supremacist, although “not intentionally racist, except insofar as it is a mark of a certain privilege to be able to overlook race” (125), that the drawing of geological lines and eras has always been about the drawing of racial “color line[s]” (128), and that “[a]ny Anthropocene politics would, in turn, need to begin by being antiracist and anticolonialist” (124). As I proceed to consider Battler’s and Parkin’s very different critical engagements with the who, what, and how of the metaphor of the energy slave, I consider the linking—and decolonial delinking (Mignolo 115)—of slavery and energy to be vitally important, yet I also question whether it is necessary or even helpful to invoke the energy slave.

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90 In *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Kathryn Yusoff makes an argument about geology that is similar to Nicholas Mirzoeff’s “It’s Not the Anthropocene, It’s the White Supremacy Scene.” I consider Yusoff’s book in detail later in this chapter.
Endangered Hydrocarbons

Lesley Battler’s 2015 poetry collection *Endangered Hydrocarbons* uses witty and ambivalent wordplay to contemplate how hydrocarbons are threatened and threatening, inanimate and lively, dead and deadly. It considers hydrocarbons as feedstock not only for petromodern consumer goods but also for culture, media, literature, and our faulty understandings of subjectivity and agency. In it, Battler appropriates and exposes corporate, government, and consumer language as well as the language of oil polemics such as Nikiforuk’s *The Energy of Slaves* and Ezra Levant’s *Ethical Oil*. My reading of the text focuses on the way Battler’s endangered hydrocarbons pool, leak, shriek, and burst into flame at the site of an unresolved contradiction in *The Energy of Slaves*: the characterization of fossil fuels as inanimate slaves.
On the cover of *Endangered Hydrocarbons*, the image of black, dripping liquid and the red lettering of the words in the title suggest both oil and blood (see Figure 14). As Nigerian poet Nnimmo Bassey makes clear in his book title *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood*, oil has become inseparable and practically indistinguishable from the human, often to devastating effect. As George Caffentzis has argued, oil is a “political liquid,” implicated and intimate with human life and politics, especially in its definition as private property rather than being understood as a commons (like water) or as belonging to the land and to Indigenous peoples. Oil has been used by humans to animate and reinforce neoliberal-capitalist, imperial, colonial, patriarchal, racist, and classist structures of power. *Endangered Hydrocarbons* examines the overlapping exploitations of humans and fossil fuels to explore the undeniable animacy of hydrocarbons.

*Endangered Hydrocarbons* is Battler’s first poetry collection, written while she worked at Shell Canada as a project information manager (Battler, “In Conversation”). The book was selected for publication by BookThug poetry editor (and work poet) Phil Hall (MillAR). In her notes at the end of the book, Battler describes her poetic process:

> All of the poems in this project are derived from texts generated in a multinational oil company. I spliced items such as wellbooks, mudlogs, geological prognoses, and meeting notes with a variety of found material, including histories and critical theoretical works, as well as travel, real estate, and home decor magazines—basically anything that crossed my path. (173)

Battler blends poetic and corporate forms (haiku, oulipo, concrete, National Energy Board application, magazine layout, well log), mixing technical and corporate language with text from a variety of seemingly unrelated sources, plus references to the landscapes of oil extraction in Alberta, the Northwest Territories, Newfoundland, and elsewhere. Through her ambiguous wording about where her found texts come from, which suggests that perhaps all of the texts ultimately come from an oil company, Battler shows that oil permeates petromodern living, yet
deflects attention from the oil industry (so that the magazines seem, for example, to be about home décor). As Battler describes in an essay, “Quarclet: The Poetics of Big Oil,” her experimental poetics works on found text in ways that mirror petrochemical processing: “I am treating production language as crude oil, excavating, treating, mixing, injecting these texts to emulate extraction processes used by the industry.” Michael Sloane calls the function of Battler’s poetry “[d]efamiliarizing business as usual” (3); for Battler, it is important to do this work of defamiliarization in the form of experimental, Language poetry.

Battler’s poetry is (mostly) impersonal, but it is grounded in her work in the petrochemical industry. As she describes,

This project grew from my own workplace concerns which include environmental devastation, relentless consumerism, and alienation from the physical world. My aim is to address these concerns as an insider, one who is involved in the shaping and disseminating of information. My focus is on the language of production, which I consider the industrial, militant arm of science. (“Quarclet”)

Battler’s poetics is shaped in response to the purposes to which she had to bend language in the service of the oil industry. She mentions in particular witnessing the testimonies of Indigenous people at National Energy Board hearings that were later distorted: “They would tell things in stories, like they would talk about how they went out fishing, and now the fish weren’t coming in, and they would say it in such human, storytelling terms, and it would all get reported back in [this] legalistic, absolutely colonial language, and it just made me furious” (“The BookThug Interview”). In three poems titled “National Energy Board” (111-16), Battler renders almost (but not quite) incoherent Indigenous testimonies from National Energy Board hearings about the Fort Nelson North Processing Facility near Fort Nelson, BC. She does this by mimicking and critiquing corporate manipulation, turning testimony about toxic waste being dumped in the river into the dumping of “PowerPoint guts in the Development Application Plan” (114). In an
interview with rob mclennan, Battler calls poetry the “dark ops of language,” a necessarily marginal ground of linguistic and conceptual experimentation. In her paid work for Shell, Battler enacted the linguistic appropriations, distortions, and evasions that she critiques in poems like these. Her poetics is a reversal of her oil work: mimicking, remixing, and contradicting corporate language, she exposes and undermines its pervasiveness, its politics, and its power.

*Endangered Hydrocarbons* is the kind of “feminist innovative/avant-garde/however-you-want-to-call-it poetry” that poet Rachel Zolf labels “Irritating and Stimulating.” As Zolf describes, this kind of poetry “skirts” the subject and subjectivity without evacuating it as originally dictated by Language poetry. So you’ll always find a trace of the material subject . . . . you’ll find language “meeting” personal/political lyric in interesting and productive ways that defy categorization or containment. (32)

Battler’s poetry effects such a skirting (both an avoidance and a feminization or queering) of the subject who does not fit in among the “Gents” at the oil company (77). She opens the collection with the poem “Unearthed,” where, in a Facebook post, a speaker who works for an oil company addresses a “Past Self” who exists in a parallel universe, representing a different trajectory the speaker’s life could have taken. The past self, who has found the speaker on Facebook—“scaling [her] Wall / of evil. lol” (15)—thinks the speaker has sold out. At the poem’s end,

```plaintext
why not visit me
in Calgary. we’ll
touch base

i can expense
your airfare (16)
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the speaker offers her former self an opportunity to sell out by accepting the idea that the expenses of the oil industry or of oil consumption are ever fully paid or accounted for. The speaker also recommends a “base” on which the two selves can meet—perhaps it is poetry,
shared history, or shared collusion with and critique of the oil industry (the fact that both selves have already sold out). In “Quarclet,” Battler reveals that she has a similar relationship with an imagined past self when she sets up a discussion of her poetics by asking, “How does a woman who once dreamed of helming a Greenpeace zodiac end up in a multinational petrochemical company notorious enough to appear in No Logo and Gravity’s Rainbow? How does she respond to old friends who call her a sell-out and bosses who accuse her of spying for the Sierra Club?”

These questions shape the poetics and politics of Endangered Hydrocarbons. Opening the book with this somewhat-personal poem, Battler offers appeasement and provocation to the reader, both inviting and refusing judgment, and suggests a reading of the subsequent poems as the product of the writer for the oil industry and the principled artist getting together to “touch base”—to connect over shared complicity in Canadian petroculture.

Endangered Hydrocarbons is an unusually long poetry collection: 170 pages of dense, intense, playful, funny, and sometimes irritating poems. This book demands much of its readers. With its sourcing and splicing of insider language from the oil industry, it is the kind of book you have to read with a dictionary on hand—plus the oilfield technology company Schlumberger’s online Oilfield Glossary (“Where the Oil Field Meets the Dictionary”). Endangered Hydrocarbons reveals what consumers and citizens within the Canadian petrostate do not know about oil, geology, petrochemicals, and the extractive practices of oil companies. A careful reader learns quite a lot about the industry, although the text is also full of Battler’s own neologisms and compounds, so that it is hard to tell which absurdities and abstractions Battler has borrowed and which she has made up. For example, Battler creates an oil/literary corporation, Sinistrale PLC (see especially 77-83; 133-42), whose name readers are meant almost—but not quite—to ignore, given the way it blends in with familiar company names like
Total, Talisman, Imperial, Syncrude, Cenovus, and Shell that hint, like Sinistrale, at the politics and the power of the industry. Battler draws readers’ attention to specialized industry language they are accustomed to turning away from. The only options for outsiders to the oil industry are incomprehension or the hard work of trying, and often failing, to understand. The poetry puts the reader in an extractive position, having to drill down into the meanings of the words to get value out of the poems. It makes the reader become a kind of oil worker. The reader’s literary work is paralleled by the process described in a section of the book as “Manuscript Extraction” (71-97). This section includes an “End-of-Narrative Report” that reads like an oil well log and equates artistic production with oil production (84-88). It also includes a transcript of a CBC Canada Reads-style conversation among panelists judging “The Leduc Award of Excellence, hosted by the Schlumberger Literary Review” (89-97), in which Canadian literature and corporate oil writing are interchangeable—perhaps in the sense that both are “petrofiction” (Ghosh, “Petrofiction”; Hitchcock). As Sloane writes, “Endangered Hydrocarbons is seriously playful” (2); my reading of the poetry takes Battler’s play seriously.

The term “endangered hydrocarbons” uses cognitive dissonance to point to the liveness of substances that humans are accustomed to thinking of as inanimate. It is a “seriously playful” neologism to parallel other politically useful and volatile terms like energy slave, trapped oil, ethical oil, and stranded assets (Nikiforuk, Energy; “trapped oil”; Levant; Unburnable). In a video interview, Battler’s publisher asks, “What are hydrocarbons and why are they endangered?” and Battler responds, in part,

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91 Sinistrale hints at the double meaning of sinister as evil or duplicitous and also left-handed and potentially creative (see “sinister”), two senses in which the oil industry is portrayed and judged that also parallel the ways Battler herself has been considered sinister and potentially dangerous by her literary and oil-industry peers (see MillAR).

92 Leduc #1, a well drilled in 1947 in Leduc, Alberta, is considered “The Birthplace of the modern day Oil Industry” (Leduc). Schlumberger publishes the Oilfield Review, not a literary review.
It does sound very simple, but these compounds are contained in everything from coal, petroleum, natural gas, which comes down to fuels and then that’s extracted to make plastics and rubber and just basically everything we do or touch or make or build in this society, so they’re incredibly important, and so we’re basically plundering the earth to get these hydrocarbons and yet at the same time, they are completely endangered as well because they are a finite resource. (“BookThug”)

Leaving aside the now-common understanding that hydrocarbons are endangering (toxic, and a cause of climate change), Battler describes two ways in which hydrocarbons are endangered. Humans endanger hydrocarbons by searching them out all over the globe to extract and burn them. At the moment of peak oil or of its deferment with unconventional or tough oil, hydrocarbons are also both an endangered (finite) resource for humans and an endangered species in their own right. I take Battler’s formulation endangered hydrocarbons as a subversive synonym for energy slave, one that critiques the violence that the metaphor of the energy slave does to both hydrocarbons and subaltern humans.93

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93 *Endangered Hydrocarbons* was published three years after *The Energy of Slaves*; it is quite possible that Battler’s text responds to Nikiforuk’s.
In *Energy Slaves* (2017), a comic by Stuart McMillen based on Fuller’s original use of the metaphor, energy slaves are consistently represented as pale, translucent human, male bodies that generate energy on stationary bicycles or propel cars and airplanes by pushing them (see Figure 15). The translucent bodies serve to convey their hypothetical presence (as if the energy consumed were generated by human labour), while raising plenty of questions about the politics of the energy slave: Why are all of the slaves seemingly male? Are they miserable? Do they feel pain? What colour is their skin? The problems these questions raise are inherent to the metaphor and to Fuller’s original calculations based on male human labour power. McMillen’s representations of energy slaves in a comic medium require him to imagine a consistent physical form for energy slaves as hybrid hydrocarbon-humans. Drawing a human-labour equivalent for fossil-fuel energy exposes the absurd and unconscionable levels of consumption that characterize “petromodernity” (LeMenager 67), as in the image of one man consuming the equivalent power of dozens more humans to propel his car. It also materializes the uncomfortable aspects of the energy slave metaphor itself. In contrast, in *The Energy of Slaves*, Nikiforuk uses word-images that do not have to be as consistent as McMillen’s imagery. His characterizations of energy slaves are polemical and creative, playing with the many possible permutations of masters and slaves and their dialectical upending, shifting between different versions and scales of the energy slave metaphor that never fully materialize. In contrast to Mouhout’s explanation that by “‘energy slaves’ or ‘virtual slaves’” he means “machines powered by fossil fuels” (341), Nikiforuk describes energy slaves variously as hydrocarbons (for example, see xii); as machines and other carbon-fuelled and labour-saving devices (176); as oil-addicted humans (66; 189); and in a few instances as subaltern humans who work “under slave-like conditions” (165). In one of Nikiforuk’s most frequently used synonyms, he refers to energy slaves as “inanimate slaves”
Nikiforuk adopts the term “inanimate energy slaves” from Fuller and uses it expansively and imaginatively, as a catchall term with shifting and unclear referents, so that the energy sources, machines, and forms of life he uses the term to describe do not fully materialize.

As a reader, I am not sure what the term inanimate slaves means. Some of Nikiforuk’s references are abstract—roughly equivalent to the translucent bodies in McMillen’s comic—for example, when Nikiforuk writes that “[t]ens of billions of inanimate slaves now rule our daily lives and contribute to our growing debt loads” (73). At other times they refer to specific machines or other objects—such as the “[n]oisy leaf-blowers, expensive SUVs, and glowing smart-phones [that] dominate modern life as fully as did the servants in a nineteenth-century Brazilian ‘Big House’” (63). Sometimes the meaning of the inanimate slave is assumed or understood by Nikiforuk but an enigma to the reader, as in Nikiforuk’s vague paraphrasing of an unknown statistic when he claims that “[t]he majority of U.S. citizens now say they detest the accelerated nature of their labor alongside inanimate slaves” (222). Furthermore, as in these examples where the so-called inanimate slaves rule, dominate, or labour alongside humans, inanimate almost always seems like the wrong word for the things Nikiforuk describes. In the second quotation, where Nikiforuk upends master-slave relations both in the present and in nineteenth-century Brazil, proposing too flippantly that the servants are the masters in each case, both inanimate and dominate seem off. The “leaf-blowers,” SUVs, and smart phones likewise

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94 Searching inside The Energy of Slaves e-book (and excluding the index), I found forty instances of energy slaves or energy slave and thirty-six of inanimate slaves or inanimate slave. Nikiforuk also refers to a “new inanimate order” (19), “deadly inanimate helpers” [in war, such as battleships, tanks, fighter jets, and submarines] (51), “inanimate servants” (63), “inanimate reproductive technologies” [by which he refers to birth control, not reproductive labour] (102), “inanimate agricultural servants” [chemicals, genetically modified organisms, factory-farmed animals] (102), “energy and its inanimate clients” [in megacities, including the structures of the city itself] (114), and “inanimate hydrocarbon slaves” (135). (All page numbers refer to the print edition.) I give some examples of how Nikiforuk uses “inanimate slaves” in the remainder of this chapter. I found no explanation for why Nikiforuk uses the word inanimate as a substitute for energy, although I note that he adopts the term from Buckminster Fuller.
dominate humans; it seems as if they, rather than their human owners, are ravenous for oil. The questions about the energy slave that I raised in relation to McMillen’s comic are compounded and complicated by Nikiforuk’s discourse, so that now I ask: Who/what are energy slaves? Are they human? Are they metaphors or things? Are they objects or subjects? In Nikiforuk’s discourse, a metaphor for energy consumption, where North Americans consume as much energy as could be generated by so many human bodies, becomes a shifting quasi-material and quasi-human presence of so many energy slaves. Haphazardly, and seemingly unintentionally, Nikiforuk’s language animates inanimate slaves, rendering them as “hungry” (217), as making up “voracious hordes” or “armies” (228; 271), and as the agents rather than only the tools of the “fossil economy” (Malm 4).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *animate* as “[e]ndowed with life, living, alive; (esp. in later use) alive and having the power of movement, like an animal.” It defines *inanimate* as “[n]ot animated or alive; destitute of life, lifeless; spec. not endowed with animal life, as in *inanimate nature*, that part of nature which is without sensation, i.e. all outside the animal world.” Despite the seeming binary opposition of these terms, as Mel Y. Chen shows in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, cognitive linguists consider animacy—“a quality of agency, awareness, mobility, and liveness” (2)—to exist instead on a scale or hierarchy. Animacy is both a linguistic taxonomy of liveness that assumes objects and subjects will stay in their places (including gendered, sexed, classed, and racialized human places) and a surprising quality of objects that are expected to be inanimate yet that show signs of animacy. In a dominant, anthropocentric animacy hierarchy, the male, white, able-bodied, heterosexual, and “‘free’ (as opposed to enslaved)” human sits at the apex (Chen 27); below him are less privileged and seemingly less animate humans, then animals, plants, machines, and so
on, with a stone or an abstract concept at the bottom (24-27). In Chen’s biopolitical theory of animacy, they argue that animacy is “conceptually slippery” (9), that it leaks (30), and that it can be shifted to serve both objectification/dehumanization and the surprising and “queer” agency of seemingly inanimate things (11). Animacy is “an often racialized and sexualized means of conceptual and affective mediation between human and inhuman, animate and inanimate, whether in language, rhetoric, or imagery” (10). For example, it makes and remakes the linguistic and ontological boundaries of the human that have served at turns to justify and condemn slavery (47). Using examples such as calling another person an animal as an insult (13) and the ways in which seemingly inanimate objects like lead and mercury act on and within humans through “intoxication” (203), Chen demonstrates “that language users are ‘animate theorists’ insofar as they deploy and rework such orders of matter” (13).

Nikiforuk’s evocations of the inanimate slave are shifty, resisting and upending taxonomies of agents and objects—for example, with the idea that humans are now enslaved by the objects we believe we control, now subject to “oil’s mastery” (189). Since fossil fuels are dead plants and animals brought back to a kind of life as energy sources, it should not be surprising that they resist the inanimacy that humans assign to natural resources we seek to have merely extractive relations with. Like other supposedly inanimate resources such as trees, fish, coal, radium, and water, oil and gas have many properties that signal their animacy. These include their use by humans as fuel, heat, and energy sources, including fuelling the rapid movement of airplanes, cars, and trains (that is, their “locomotion” [Chen 28]); their flammability and visibility as, for example, gas flare; the force with which they can come bursting out of the earth; their existence in solid, liquid, and gas states; their fluid movement through pipelines; their capacity to leak, poison, intoxicate, and kill; all of the things that can be
made from them, including cars, clothing, fertilizer, food, and so on; and, of course, the measurable impacts that their combustion has on the earth’s climate and sea levels, which is a kind of agency. I interpret Nikiforuk’s evident enjoyment of the many opportunities for wordplay related to the energy slave as an unconscious response to the animacy of hydrocarbons. Nikiforuk acts, seemingly unintentionally, as an animacy theorist by elaborating and mixing the metaphor of the energy slave.95 As I will demonstrate, Battler’s poetics draws attention to a theory of the animacy of hydrocarbons that is latent both in The Energy of Slaves and in the language of the petrochemical industry.

Human and nonhuman slaves appear in Battler’s poem “Pax McMurray,” subtitled “rise of the Fort McMurray Empire” (29-37). Battler’s combination of Roman and Canadian human-energy slavery mimics Nikiforuk’s account of energy slavery, which derives much of its imagery from ancient Rome. Battler breaks with Nikiforuk, however, by adapting the language of energy slavery to evoke the exploitative class relations of oil work. Nikiforuk compares coal miners during the industrial revolution to enslaved people (20), but although he occasionally mentions oil workers in The Energy of Slaves (see 32; 40; 47; 92), he does not consider a relationship between oil work and energy slavery. Nikiforuk appears to be thinking of oil executives (perhaps including Battler) and not oil extraction workers when he writes that “the employees of oil companies make up an energy aristocracy and are among the best paid workers in the world” (198), and his evocations of oil extraction workers are either cursory or absurd.96 Yet, given that

95 Considering Chen’s animacy theory in relation to the energy humanities reveals that the animacy of fossil fuels shifts not only Nikiforuk’s argument in The Energy of Slaves but also other energy theories, such as Matthew T. Huber’s paradoxical characterization of “nonliving fuel” as “lifeblood” (Lifeblood 76) and Andreas Malm’s contrasting of the “animate power” of humans and animals against the “inanimate” power of both the renewable “flow of energy” (water and wind power) and “the stock of energy” (fossil fuels) (38-41).

96 Nikiforuk seems to count oil workers among the enslavers, consumers, and beneficiaries of fossil fuels, as in his use of the example of “overweight” Kuwaiti oil workers to demonstrate that “oil-producing countries have some of the most supersized citizens on earth” (Energy 92).
his metaphors draw on a Roman, slaveholding worldview he describes as being divided into
“two distinct classes: the domini (the masters of energy) and the servi (the providers of energy)”
(4), it is surprising that he has nothing to say about the servitude of oil extraction workers. I will
discuss this further in relation to Parkin’s poetry, below.

“Pax McMurray” combines Roman and Canadian histories in a parodic account of the “rise
of the Fort McMurray empire.” The speaker, an “awestruck,” Prius-driving visitor to the oil
sands, describes Fort McMurray as “epicentre of the world’s largest / petroleum empire,” where
“Nero fiddled / while Syncrude tossed Christians / into geoclimes” (29). Battler writes, sampling
text and imagery grounded in Alberta and ancient Rome,

i’m awestruck over
the scope of work
one can only gape
in wonder. how did
slaves from Sundre
pull those giant rigs
on wooden rollers[.] (30)

The speaker compares the “scope of work” of the automated and large-scale extraction she sees
near Fort McMurray (a combination of in-situ steam-assisted gravity drainage extraction and the
open-pit mines called up by the word “gape”) with conventional oil extraction methods in
Sundre, Alberta and elsewhere. Fort McMurray, where truck-and-shovel extraction is becoming
increasingly automated (Morgan; Vomiero) and where in-situ extraction is highly technologized
and requires little manual labour, makes the crude technologies of conventional oil extraction
seem outdated, as if the “giant rigs” were “on wooden rollers,” like a Trojan Horse or a wooden
catapult on wheels. Likewise, it makes the labour of conventional oil extraction seem to be
unnecessarily dangerous, and unnecessarily performed by humans.
Nikiforuk refers to “hydraulic fracturing, in situ bitumen recovery, and deep-sea drilling” as “inanimate slave technologies” (175), and Battler considers the effects of automation on oil workers in “Pax McMurray.” The recent Petroleum Labour Market Information (PetroLMI) report *A Workforce in Transition: Oil and Gas Skills of the Future* cites oil sands work as an exception to its optimism that new, more technological jobs will replace many of those lost in the oil and gas industry since oil prices dropped in 2014 and triggered industry automation and layoffs: “Mining operations in the oil sands is one area where automation will reduce the workforce. Driverless automated heavy haulers are now in operation at Suncor and are expected to be rolled out to other operations over the next three to five years. The rollout could result in thousands of job losses among heavy equipment operators” (14). In a section on “the Edson wars” (between “Edson’s conventional well culture” and “the intellectuals / at Fort Mac” [35]), “the Murrians” use “supply-chain / logistics” and technological innovations (like “quick & dirty electricity” and “horse-drawn chariot” [35]),

routing the Edsonites  
who continued utilizing  
slaves, suffering  
endless LTIs[.] (36)

These lines refer to conventional oil workers as enslaved and suggest that increasingly automated and technologized tar sands extraction is more humane. The acronym *LTI*, itself a form of corporate speak, stands for “lost time incident,” a work-related illness or injury that causes an employee to miss work (“What Is an LTI?”). An LTI abstracts the physical, emotional, or economic impacts of an injury experienced by a worker, counting it as lost time and labour for the company; it reveals that treating workers as undifferentiated sources of labour dehumanizes and de-animates workers. In the industry rhetoric that Battler satirizes, automation is represented
as more humane, as a means of increasing safety and efficiency (no more LTIs!), and of demonstrating fiscal responsibility, despite leaving workers unemployed.

Endangered hydrocarbons feature alongside enslaved humans in “Pax McMurray,” in a philosophy attributed to “Lucretius / Fort Mac’s lead hellenist”:

\[
\text{any return of hydrocarbons} \\
\text{to the divine must come through} \\
\text{their emancipation from geological bondage[.] (32)}
\]

Battler extrapolates the concept of the energy slave, linking the idea that hydrocarbons can be said to be enslaved by humans (as in Nikiforuk’s “hydrocarbon servants” [xii]) with the geological and industry-based concept that hydrocarbons are trapped in underground geological formations and therefore that their extraction is a kind of liberation. In addition to critiquing oil consumption, calling hydrocarbons slaves can also be used as a justification for their liberation from the earth and their progression into the atmosphere—a journey that may be the desire of the hydrocarbons, a return to the divine as their natural, transcendent destination. (This is a reversal of the idea that hydrocarbons are endangered through extraction, which imagines that they desire to stay underground.) In keeping with free-market ideology, this pro-industry use of the metaphor of the energy slave assumes it is always better to keep the hydrocarbons, like the money, flowing. It informs the logic of arguments that extracting fossil fuels is just the right or obvious thing to do, such as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s claim that “there isn’t a country in the world that would find billions of barrels of oil and leave it in the ground while there is a market for it” (“Announcement”), or Ezra Levant’s claim that the oil in the tar sands is basically spilling itself—“bubbling out of the soaked ground and oozing into the rivers”—so that bitumen extraction could be called “the largest cleanup of an oil spill in the history of the world” (107).

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97 See for example “Oil and Gas Traps”; “trapped oil.”
Battler’s “Pax McMurray” engages with the concept of the energy slave in a playful but volatile way, demonstrating both the animacy of the “inanimate slave” and the shiftiness that Girvan argues is inherent to any ecological metaphor. Like the metaphor of endangered hydrocarbons, the metaphor of the energy slave does not have an inherent politics and is not easily contained. In her poetry-experiments, Battler allows the meanings and politics of both metaphors to proliferate. She shows that the industry can use the metaphor to justify whatever it likes—including automation and continuing to extract, refine, and burn fossil fuels.

The poem “The Petrochemical Ball,” in which the voices of exploited and abused hydrocarbons can be heard, is an exploration of the question of whether the hydrocarbon, like the subaltern in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s formulation, can speak. Battler uses onomatopoeia to represent what hydrocarbons sound like when they are being separated in “the Fractionater” (56; a real term for a refinery), “where we reform / raw crude” (56). See one page from the poem in Figure 16. In her argument that late capitalist life is “geologic life,” geographer Kathryn Yusoff responds to those who might scoff at the idea that fossils speak:

But what is the nature of their speech and what would they say ‘if’ they could speak? Speak! Nothing? Only a spectre? A dumb object? What mutism is this that characterises our lack of language for this geologic dimension of life? The question here may not be, “How does a fossil speak?” but what is being said for and of this fossilised inheritance for the future, and where is agency located within these geographical, temporal, and material utterances? And why is this geological being, implied in the Anthropocene, so muted in our discussions? (“Geologic” 789)

In light of the naming of the geological epoch of the Anthropocene, Yusoff argues that it is time to rethink how we account for our relationships with fossil fuels and for what they might be saying to and through us. By sounding out the noises hydrocarbons make when they are being refined, Battler conveys information about what it feels and sounds like to be intimate with hydrocarbons, or to pay attention to them.
BA-ba-de-ba-pa
ba-ba-de-BA-pa
BA-pa  BA-pa

ah, the stomp
of Olefin feedstock
ready to be rendered
into the delicious
Alberta plastics
served at the
Palliser

don’t
be naïve

these pentanes
are merely
feigning pain

in reality
they are
caucustic

unstable
disloyal to
the Company

allow me to
translate today’s
épater

Pentane 1:
TGIF! thank god
it’s Faraday

Pentane 2:
what poet
do i quote
before i
explode?

QUEEEE-AWNX

ozone
throat
music

a sonic
anomaly

Battler suggests that hydrocarbons have distinctive voices and personalities, and thus that they are animate and can speak, but the question becomes, as it is in Spivak’s famous essay, whether their speech can survive representation—whether it can be heard and understood. Battler’s translation of the speech of hydrocarbons may be a seemingly impossible proposal to listen to what oil has to say for itself.

Reminiscent of Guillaume Apollinaire’s World War I poem “Du coton dans les oreilles,” this visually loud poem at first seems merely silly and fun, but, as with Apollinaire’s representations of trench warfare, while reading “The Petrochemical Ball” the reader encounters the link between its onomatopoeic, semi-concrete forms and its disturbing content. The voice of the human speaker, printed in regular type, has the tone of a tour guide, walking visitors through the facility. The guide’s speech, punctuated by statements like “please don’t / feed them” (56) and by the interruptions of the “pitiful / shrieks and / squawks” of the hydrocarbons (59), shown in bold and often capitalized text, contains hints and eventually evidence that the hydrocarbons are endangered—imprisoned and tortured in the Fractionater, a location that takes on resonances with prisons and Indian Residential Schools as the poem goes on. The tour guide intones, with echoes of cultural genocide and the banning of Indigenous languages at residential schools across Canada in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see A Knock on the Door 59-65),

our role
is to distill
volatiles
track their
vernacular
eliminate
rhyming
slang
.
The “alpha / bets” have to do with the molecular structures of different hydrocarbons that are distilled, cracked, and reformed in an oil refinery. In the process of fractional distillation, crude oil is brought to a boil, turned into vapour, and introduced into a fractionating column that separates and captures the hydrocarbons that condense at different levels in the column because of their different boiling points. Lighter hydrocarbons like propane are collected at the top, and heavier hydrocarbons like tar at the bottom (Huber, *Lifeblood* 65-70). Battler’s stanzas, in different lengths and heights, represent different molecular configurations and the relative positions of heavier and lighter hydrocarbons inside the Fractionater. Matthew Huber argues that “refineries can be seen as particular expressions of the historically specific relations between petroleum and society” (*Lifeblood* 70). The Fractionater is central to Huber’s metaphor of the privatized and entrepreneurial “fractionated lives” of neoliberal American subjects (64), but he also notes that oil refineries are toxic and endangering to nearby communities, disproportionately communities of colour, as in his example of “Cancer Alley” on the Gulf Coast (69). A Canadian example is the Aamjiwnaang First Nation near Sarnia, Ontario, which is surrounded by petrochemical processing plants and which deals on a daily basis the health effects of polluted air, water, and land (see Wiebe). With refineries representing and producing environmental racism—especially through the hydrocarbons that escape the Fractionater through flaring or leakage—Battler’s implied parallels with slavery and genocide are, sadly, appropriate.

Later, the tour guide assures disturbed visitors to the Fractionater that “these pentanes / are merely / feigning pain” (57), adopting the rhetoric of “forced stoniness” that Yusoff notes in
enslavers’ representations of the pain of the enslaved (*Billion* 99). The tour guide’s speech simultaneously de-animates and animates the hydrocarbons, by suggesting both that they do not feel pain and that they are sentient beings who can feign it. These lines reveal the coloniality that is tied to (petro)modernity, as in Walter Mignolo’s description of coloniality as “the darker side of Western modernity” (106) and his argument that “[t]o end coloniality it is necessary to end the fictions of modernity” (109). Modern/colonial fictions of progress and development reign in the Fractionater, and their implications extend to the epistemic violence of the idea that hydrocarbons and the earth do not feel the pain of extraction, refining, combustion, pollution, or endangerment. Pentane 2’s musing,

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what poet
do i quote
before i
explode? (57)
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is translated for the visitors by the tour guide. It echoes Frantz Fanon’s statement, “The Negro is a toy in the white man’s hands; so, in order to shatter the hellish cycle, he explodes” (140), as well as Langston Hughes’s musings in “Harlem” about “What happens to a dream deferred”—“Or does it explode?” (426). The tour guide tries but fails to relegate the hydrocarbons to the category of inanimate objects. The hydrocarbons, fail, in turn, to speak in a way that the guests can understand, or that can cross the divide created by their modern/colonial representation. Many of the hydrocarbons are destined to “explode” inside a combustion engine that will contain and appropriate their speech as energy; exploding instead in an industrial accident, at a moment of their own choosing, may be a means for the hydrocarbons to speak in a way that subverts but cannot overcome their representation. Visitors to the Fractionater are offered a disturbing sensory experience of relating to hydrocarbons only in captivity, enslaved on the visitors’ behalf for the purpose of extracting energy or work from them, and rendered dangerous through their
enslavement. “The Petrochemical Ball” reveals that the extraction and refining of hydrocarbons is a colonial endeavour.

By showing that colonial and dehumanizing ideologies operate in all aspects of the fossil economy, including at the levels of extraction, production, and consumption, Battler makes a link between energy and slavery that Yusoff would later theorize as a geological link between “the inhuman as matter and the inhuman as race” (Billion 5). In *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Yusoff writes that “geology is a hinge that joins indigenous genocide, slavery, and settler colonialism through an indifferent structure of extraction” (107). Linked geological and racial distinctions between “inhuman and human” (4) and “nonlife and life” (5) underlie the construction of minerals and humans as property, so that there is an “inhuman proximity” between Black and Indigenous subjects and hydrocarbons (xii). Slavery may have been abolished (although hardly eradicated), and settler colonial governments may have adopted the language of reconciliation, but the condition that Yusoff describes as “Black Anthropocenes” persists through “[t]he proximity of black and brown bodies to harm” (xii). Through ongoing environmental racism, such bodies are more likely, for example, to do dangerous extraction work such as coal mining and oil extraction, to live near toxic extraction and production sites, and to be threatened by the worst and most immediate effects of climate change. While the Anthropocene threatens the end of the world as conceived by “White Geology” (xii), and while debates rage about possible start dates, Yusoff notes that “Black and brown death is the precondition of every Anthropocene origin story” (65) and that “imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence” (xiii). In contrast to Mirzoeff’s proposal that the Anthropocene should instead be called “the White Supremacy Scene,” Yusoff’s Black Anthropocenes are not an “alter-cene” (61). They are a
precondition of extractive modernity/coloniality, of capitalism, and of the human subject, including the white geological subject of the Anthropocene, who becomes alarmed at this moment only because now extraction threatens not the world and the future but their world and their future.

In another critical engagement with the metaphor of the energy slave, Battler’s poem “Uppity Molecules” figures fugitive hydrocarbon emissions as fugitive slaves (103-104). It reads as a response to Nikiforuk’s most problematic comparisons between human slavery and fossil-fuel exploitation, especially this statement: “fugitive emissions are so prevalent that more than 50,000 barrels of oil escape into water or land every day. (That’s the equivalent of 450,000 escaping human slaves)” (180). Mixing metaphors by equating inefficiencies in the infrastructures of oil and of slavery, Nikiforuk carelessly figures both leaking hydrocarbons and escaping enslaved people as bad things. Battler mixes the same metaphors in “Uppity Molecules,” highlighting problems with making light of the inhuman proximity of hydrocarbons and enslaved humans. Battler calls the fugitive hydrocarbons/slaves uppity, using a term with a history of describing African American people who supposedly refuse to stay in their rightful places, beginning in the Jim Crow era and extending to recent racist comments about Barack and Michelle Obama (see Reeve; “uppity, adj.”; “uppity”). Her use of this term also echoes the tendency of light hydrocarbons like natural gas to rise and leak, as well as Nikiforuk’s description of servants dominating and ruling the households in which they work. Battler inserts the names of hydrocarbons, refinery emissions, and oil-industry places into eighteenth-century advertisements placed in the Virginia Gazette by slaveholders for the return of escaped enslaved people, as in this stanza:

run away from the subscriber, last Sunday was Fortnight, a Member of the Aliphatic Family named METHYL, who formerly belonged to Imperial Oil. he is thin visag’d, has
small Eyes, and a very large Beard; and plays upon the Fiddle. it is supposed he is gone
to Cold Lake, where he has a wife, known as Ethyl. whoever apprehends him, so that he
be brought to me near Caroline shall have a Pistole Reward. N.B. as he ran away
without any Cause, i desire he may be punish’d by Whipping, or Steam-Stripping as the
Law directs. (103)

The found text for this poem comes from the book *Country: The Twisted Roots of Rock ‘n’ Roll*,
where the author, Nick Tosches, cites the ads somewhat disinterestedly as references to “fiddling
slaves” (168). Battler’s adaptations are filled with puns and chemistry jokes; her use of the text
also comes off as disinterested and perhaps too lighthearted about the equation of the endangered
and enslaved state of hydrocarbons and the lives of the enslaved people to whom the
advertisements refer, yet I read this poem as an absurdist performance of disinterest and a “dark
ecology” (Morton 185). In a style that mimics Nikiforuk’s mixed metaphors, “Uppity
Molecules” gives hydrocarbons a troubling quasi-human materiality as enslaved, exploited, and
fugitive energy.

In “Uppity Molecules,” Battler relocates the sites of enslavement in Virginia onto sites in
Alberta that are significant for the oil industry, such as Caroline (site of a sour gas field and
Shell’s Caroline Gas Complex) and Cold Lake (site of Imperial Oil’s Cold Lake in-situ heavy oil
operation, also of CFB Cold Lake, a Royal Canadian Air Force base), locations where the
hydrocarbons in the poem are enslaved, steam-stripped, reformed (tortured in the Fractionater)
and policed, and where their escape constitutes an emergency (see “Caroline Gas Complex”;
“Cold Lake”). By relocating narratives of human slavery from Virginia to Alberta, “Uppity
Molecules” draws attention to the suppressed history of human slavery in Canada. As historian
Afua Cooper has shown, “[d]iscussions about Euro-Canadian slavery often disconnect Canada

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98 Battler lists only one book by Nick Tosches—*Where Dead Voices Gather*, his biography of minstrel/blackface
performer Emmett Miller—in her “Partial list of sources” (*Endangered* 174), but the ads are not quoted in that book.
from the larger Atlantic and American world of slavery of which it was very much a part” (10).99 There are indeed similarities between what Cooper calls the “bulldozed and ploughed over” history of slavery in Canada (7) and Canadians’ willful continuation of unconscionable extraction and overconsumption of hydrocarbons, despite knowing that climate change is irreversible and caused by humans. Yet, there are also differences and frictions, among them the possibility that the metaphor of the energy slave further dehumanizes enslaved humans by obscuring the specificity and reality of their lives and putting them to work, problematically, in the service of the environmental cause.

The surreal narrative of the escaped, bearded, fiddling, and married hydrocarbon METHYL might be silly/funny if it were not overlaid on both a reprehensible claim on the life of an escaped enslaved human and a leak of toxic natural gas. This poem exemplifies Battler’s poetics of serious play. In it, Battler leans into the mixed imagery of fugitive emissions and escaped slaves, risking straying into what might be considered intolerable content for poetry in order to query whether or how such mixing can be funny or even acceptable. She exposes the layers of appropriation at work in the poem (by the enslaver, by Tosches, and by her) and suggests that the metaphor of the energy slave participates in such appropriations. Most of the original contents of the enslaver’s assertion of ownership of an enslaved person can still be read despite Battler’s manipulation of the found text; it includes, for example, the dehumanizing separation of the enslaved man from his spouse. The very existence of such a newspaper advertisement demonstrates the collaboration between and assumed moral superiority of the enslavers. This is also reflected in the promise of a pistol—a tool of domination exchanged

99 Many Canadians do not know that our colonial history up until the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833 includes over 200 years during which the enslavement of African and Indigenous people was both legal and common in Canada (Cooper 70).
between enslavers—as reward for the return of the enslaved person, as well as in the enslaver’s request for whoever finds the man to whip him. The absurdity of the poem arises from the seeming futility of the enslaved person’s escape, and also the doubling of the surreal narrative of METHYL and the enslaver’s intolerable (now-surreal) assumptions. These elements furthermore evoke the absurdity of the ongoing extraction, refining, and combustion of fossil fuels, even in the face of catastrophic climate change, and despite the unacceptable ways in which it perpetuates the human/inhuman relations of slavery and colonialism through environmental racism. In this sense, “Uppity Molecules” resonates with Lennon’s evocation of the last words spoken by Eric Garner (a Black man killed by police officers)—“I can’t breathe”—as a matter of energy justice (21). In the face of the intolerability, the unconscionability, and the absurdity of human slavery, Yusoff characterizes enslaved people’s acts of resistance such as running away as acts that claim “another geophysics of being” (Billion 99) and “the possibility of other worlds” (107-108). She rejects solutions to the problem of the Anthropocene that represent “a desire to overcome coloniality without a corresponding relinquishing of the power it continues to generate in terms of who gets to formulate, implement, and speak to/of the future” (27). “Uppity Molecules” calls, seriously playfully, for a decolonization of energy.

*Endangered Hydrocarbons* reveals that Canadians’ relationships with hydrocarbons are colonial; it stimulates movement toward a decolonized relationship with oil. Stó:lō poet and orator Lee Maracle has described respectful relationship with water, another “political liquid” (Caffentzis), in a way that I propose to adapt for imagining respectful relationship with oil: “We do not own the water, the water owns itself. We are responsible for ensuring that we do not damage the water. We do not have an absolute right to use and abuse the water; we must take care of the water and ensure that we have a good relationship with it. This relationship is based
on mutual respect” (37). The idea that oil, like water, is sovereign and owns itself undermines the many political uses to which it has been turned and demands a new ethics for relating to lively hydrocarbons, other humans, and the land.

The shrieking and hissing sounds and the shifting significations of the endangered hydrocarbons in Battler’s poetry lead to a consideration of the animacy of oil and also of the manipulation of its human politics, including the metaphor of the energy slave. If Nikiforuk engages playfully but still humanistically with the animacy of the energy slave, Battler’s approach to the animacy of hydrocarbons through a skirted human agency is serious play that works at the borders of animate and inanimate, human and inhuman. When read alongside The Energy of Slaves, Battler’s poetry deepens the stretch of the energy slave metaphor, highlighting and exploring the implications of its “energy unconscious” (Yaeger 309). Endangered Hydrocarbons takes seriously the animacy of our energy sources and proposes an alternate conception of what it might look like for “the world’s wealthiest citizens” to be, as Nikiforuk writes, “busy attending to their petroleum slaves” (61). Attending to energy slaves might mean not only fuelling our cars, greasing our machines, and checking Instagram, but also caring for and listening to our hydrocarbon, human, and more-than-human relations.

A Relationship with Truth

God please say when ends meet on minimum wages
Until then
I guess I’m just caged in
My family name has been slaves since days of cave men[.] (Parkin, Relationship 53)

Endangered and endangering hydrocarbons appear in Grande Prairie oil worker Naden Parkin’s 2014 poetry collection A Relationship with Truth: Poem and Verse Born in the Canadian Oil Patch, when he describes his work, for example, as “[freeing] benzenes, trapped, / Deep down
under hard grounds” (52) and “Taming natural gas” (53). Parkin’s engagement with the metaphor of the energy slave is quite different from Battler’s, however: he uses it as a working-class metaphor to portray his own endangerment and pain, and as a way to distinguish between the extractive work he does for the money and the good person he believes he really is. Calling himself a slave allows the persona to avoid bearing too much blame for the sins of petromodernity, but it is also disempowering and uncomfortable, so the poetry reaches toward other ways of thinking about responsibility and of relating to the land.

Parkin works in Alberta and Saskatchewan as a “mud man”—that is, as he describes on his website, as “a drilling fluid specialist, driving from rig to rig testing drilling fluid, making recommendations, tracking inventory and lining up trucks for fluid and product transportation. 24 hours a day, 7 days a week” (Parkin, “Real Life”). Parkin finished high school and one year of college, then began working in the oil patch, where his father and brother also worked. He trained as a mud man in Houston, Texas before returning to work in Canada. His hyperbolic representation of how much he works reinforces the oil-worker identity that is central to his poetics. Yet, as my reading of Parkin’s poetry demonstrates, there is a second sense in which his identity as a “mud man” exceeds his job description: as a person who was “Born in the Canadian Oil Patch” (as his subtitle indicates), Parkin’s identity is tied to the land where he lives and works.

The title of Parkin’s book echoes and critiques Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth. Parkin contrasts people he calls “immersed in facts” (11)—people like lobbyists, politicians, and activists who make one-sided arguments for or against oil—with oil workers who have a more intimate and complicated connection with oil. He makes no dispute with the truth of climate change, but his title, shown on the front cover with the word relationship seemingly handwritten
in oil (see Figure 17), suggests that there are important insights that come along with doing oil work—that is, with having a relationship with oil. Relationships are important in Parkin’s book: the persona arrives at poetic insights and truths by considering the relationships in his life—with his family, with oil work, with the oil patch, with women—and often by showing the painful contradictions between those relationships.

Figure 17. Front cover of *A Relationship with Truth* by Naden Parkin, 2014. Used with permission.
The photograph on the front cover is an oil-patch landscape in morning or evening light, with a cloudy sky and an oil well in the foreground. The black font that spells out *relationship* ties in with the shadowed pump jack, but the extraction machinery is off centre in this photo composed to capture and juxtapose the fossil-fuel energy regime and the “solar economy” (centred around solar power as photosynthesis) that preceded it (see Johnson, *Carbon* 12; Crosby)—or perhaps a future renewable energy system. The eye is drawn to a point on the horizon between the sun and the land, so that the image, which is undeniably a petromodern image, also invites contemplation of transition—of something beyond or after oil.

The poetry in *A Relationship with Truth* is lyric, narrative poetry, often in rhyming free verse that is reminiscent of hip-hop lyrics and aware of its unconventional form and content. The words “*Poem and Verse*” in the subtitle refer to poetry and hip-hop, closely related forms with separate traditions and audiences. Adam Bradley writes in *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*, “Rap is poetry, but its popularity relies in part on people not recognizing it as such” (xii). Parkin’s unique poetics blends the two forms and makes them indistinguishable. Parkin writes, “I’ll show you coarse rhyme, I was born to force rhymes” (40), emphasizing the hip-hop qualities of his writing, and perhaps its un-literariness. In addition to rhyme and strong rhythms, Parkin also uses refrains and repetitions, often to show how things have changed over time, so that many of the poems read like song lyrics. The hip-hop elements make the poetry seem both new and more like “old-school poetry” (Bradley xv), with rhyming and rhythmic lines that have more affinity with older poetic forms like the ballad than with contemporary poetry. Thus, in both its form and its content that negotiates the tension between “modernity and wilderness” (Jon

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100 Because I am a scholar of poetry, and for simplicity’s sake, I refer to the individual verses/poems as poems for the remainder of this chapter.
Gordon 56), Parkin’s poetics bears comparison with S.C. Ells’s popular, rhyming poetry (see chapter 1).

*A Relationship with Truth* has a loose narrative arc that begins with the breakup of the persona’s family and the loss of the family farm when he is a teenager. It traces his search for meaning and for a life partner, and it ends with his marriage to his dream girl and with the sense that he has found a way of life in the oil patch that resembles the agricultural life he lost. Few of the poems are about work, although there are some notable exceptions, such as “Blue Collar Mayhem” (53-54) and “Busy Laying Laminate” (59). As Parkin says in a television interview, “I wouldn’t say the book’s about the oil patch, it’s just, more, heavily influenced by it” (“Newcap”). In other words, the oil patch is the setting, not the subject, of the poems. As in the photograph on the front cover, which could be described as a picture of a sunrise, oil work permeates and grounds the collection, even when the speaker’s focus is directed elsewhere.

Although not all of Parkin’s poetry is work writing of the variety that Tom Wayman favours when he writes that work should be “the central concern in our literature, as in life” (*Inside* 32), the poems say a great deal about oil work through imagery and metaphor based in the milieu of the oil patch, as well as through the persona’s contemplation of the environmental impacts of his work, his ethical responsibilities (to family, friends, and the earth), and a system of hydrocarbon and human exploitation that keeps working-class people doing the physical and cultural dirty work of resource extraction.

Parkin’s poetry is unique among the oil worker poetry I study. A self-published author with insightful endorsements on the back cover of his book not from the literati but instead from a champion UFC fighter and the host of a Discovery Channel show called *License to Drill*, he represents oil work not only from inside the work itself (as Wayman argues any real work writer
does [Inside 22]), but also from inside the working class and the sense he shares with other well-paid oil workers that he has no viable employment options outside the oil industry. Aside from Ells (who was a civil servant),\textsuperscript{101} Parkin is the only oil worker poet I study who describes oil work as a lifelong career for himself (not only for others). His dependence on the oil industry makes it especially significant that this book was also published in April 2014, two months before the oil bust that saw the price of oil decline from around $110 US per barrel between 2011 and June 2014 to a low point of $29 US per barrel in January 2016 (Ellwanger et al. 1). The decline led oil companies to tighten their belts through automation and the elimination of oil and gas jobs, many of which will not be reinstated (Workforce Insights 3). A Relationship with Truth is prescient in its concern for the futures of oil workers on the eve of the collapse and in anticipation of energy transition. Parkin’s writing could be dismissed as doggerel, but to do so would be to ignore what may be a marginalized working-class or oil-patch aesthetic, a possibility the poet refers to when he points out an enigma about himself: “You’ll never know whether I’m clever or slow” (23). Parkin’s unique cleverness is what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o calls “poor theory” (3): intuitive, embodied knowledge articulated by a working-class subject who has a profound understanding of the power relations that structure his oil work.

The speaker of the poetry, who sometimes refers to himself in the third person as Naden, is a persona closely aligned with Parkin. The alignment is so close, in fact, that Parkin describes the speaker as himself, saying in a television interview, “This book is me, you know. It’s my experiences, it’s my love, it’s my passion, it’s my fears, it’s my work. It’s just everything.” In the same interview, he says, “In poetry, you have to be real. You have to be honest with yourself” (Interview with Rustie Dean). As impersonal poetry in Language, conceptual, experimental, and

\textsuperscript{101} Tar sands innovator S.C. Ells’s job security and privilege as a civil servant set him apart from the other poets, who are employed by oil companies and subcontractors.
lyric forms (including Battler's poetry) has shown, the genre of poetry makes no such demands. It is common for a poet to take on a persona (especially a male poet like Robert Service, Al Purdy, or Wayman), but the genre of hip-hop, with its general disdain for fronting (or misrepresenting oneself), has a different set of expectations about honesty and authenticity. Drawing on the traditions of sentimental poetry, the personal lyric, and hip-hop, Parkin’s poetic persona is self-conscious and productively contradictory.

In “A Place Within,” a poem that credits poetry with helping Parkin find his authentic self, he writes, “As I navigate through this maze of shit / I found a place in Naden where no fake emits / No pain exists” (24). Anticipating criticism that he is fronting, Parkin shows at least two faces of a mud man: a tough, hypermasculine oil worker, and an emotionally vulnerable lover of the land. One “truth” about Naden is that he is conflicted, living a life adapted to the structure of feeling that Dymphny Dronyk calls “contrary infatuation.” In Parkin’s poetry, contrary infatuation most often involves being in relationships that contradict one another, where his interpellation to be loyal to oil (after all “Propane pays him” [Parkin 53]) is in conflict with his love for the land (his “hippy’s conscience” [57]). Telling the truth about contradictory infatuation, the persona does not completely avoid pain, but “no pain exists” in the sense that he avoids causing himself further pain by suppressing one relationship in favour of the other. Not fronting, in this case, means presenting contradictory versions of the self as honestly as possible. Pushing back at any perception that his exposure of the contradictions that structure his relationship with oil is accidental, naïve, or symptomatic of an energy unconscious, Parkin

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102 According to some of the top Urban Dictionary definitions of “fronting,” it means “Acting like you are more, or you have more than what really exists” (Stacy); “Trying to pass yourself off as something you are not” (Nitro Survivor); and “Misrepresenting yourself, in regards to what you have or how you feel” (Oz). In The Fugees’s “Fu-Gee-La,” fronting is “A boy on the side of Babylon, trying to front like he’s down with Mount Zion.”

103 Because of the proximity between the poet and the persona, I refer to the speaker of the poems as either “Parkin” or “the persona.”
writes, “Know that I chose to show this / To let my soul expose what all of you already know / But you hold in” (37). His address to the reader suggests that the honesty of the “Oil Patch Poet” (38) exposes truths that are repressed not only by oil workers but also by petromodern Canadians—for example, the fact that each of us, not only the oil worker, has a relationship with oil to account for. Yet, Parkin’s exposures and confessions do not preclude A Relationship with Truth from also repressing some truths.

One aspect of Parkin’s persona in A Relationship with Truth is his identification with the subject position of the supposedly typical oil worker who does hard, dangerous work for the money and who embodies a dominant, iconic Northern masculinity. The persona is “[a] working class man” (42); a man concerned with what it means to be a man (see 68-69); a cisgender, heterosexual man looking for a woman to love him back; a man who struggles with addiction (see 30-31; 63); and a man with “A fist of cash” (57). Like Rig Talk poet Peter Christensen, Parkin is unapologetic about his masculinism; he uses it to show that he belongs among oil workers. From within this insider position, however, he represents the oil worker as deeply conflicted. For example, the poem “Northern Man” begins with the persona describing himself as “just a Northern man,” a hypermasculine worker of the type familiar from Ells’s or Robert Service’s poetry; he also represents his participation in the oil and gas industry as part of a nation-building project that he believes in. He says, “You ask me, I’d invest in that / It’s natural gas and the oil patch,” seemingly expressing full support of and identification with the industry. After this, however, the poem shifts and ends with a note of ambivalence: “Western Canada, we’re blessed with that / And cursed with that / And if you think not, you’re immersed in facts” (11). Parkin consistently represents oil as a blessing and curse, for the oil worker and for Canada, with no one poem expressing only identification with the oil industry. I read his poetry as what
Jennifer Wenzel calls “petro-magic-realism”: it undermines the dual narratives of “petro-magic” about the oil industry as either the blessing of “petro-promise” (“Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited” 212) or the “resource-curse diagnosis” for local communities, especially Indigenous ones (220).104 Parkin’s description of people as “immersed in facts” seems to describe those who accept either of these myths, along with a partisan set of “facts,” such as those cited on one side by the oil lobby or on the other by environmental activists. The persona shows here that the mud man shares with the project information manager an understanding that “facts” are ideological. Yet, Parkin still professes belief in “truth.” His formulation *A Relationship with Truth* suggests a distinction between “facts” and the truths that can be learned through relationship. He privileges the truths he has learned by doing oil work and living in the oil patch.

Despite his claims to be “Invincible and untouchable” (38), Parkin also admits that he conceals “wounds deep as tar sumps” (52) and “shame” (53) beneath his tough exterior. His sense of shame is most acute because of the contradiction between his oil work and his professed love of women and of a feminized earth. References to women in Parkin’s poetry can be crass, as in these lines from “Love Can Kill Ya”: “And forget what’s said about just being friends / If she don’t spread, then he goes and treads, / But he wants her to spread because he doesn’t want it to end” (19), where both characters appear to only follow, not make, the rules of a toxic masculinity. These lines from “The Cutest Girl” are somewhat sweeter: “She was the cutest girl I ever knew, / She was the cutest girl I’d ever do” (28). The persona’s quest for a soul mate ends with marriage to a woman he wants to do right by, with his maxim to “hold your woman close, when she needs her man” (69), but it is clear that Northern women do not get the same respect from him as Northern men. The tough masculinity of the persona is revealed as patriarchal and

104 See my earlier discussion of the “resource curse” on page 161.
as a form of violence against women, while he continues to embody it, expressing sorrow at being misunderstood and unappreciated by women. The mud man’s painful experience of contrary infatuation in his quest for romantic love is paralleled in his relationship with the land.

Parkin represents his concern for the harm that extracting and burning fossil fuels does to nature as concern for a feminized earth whose rape and murder he participates in (35; 53; 72). The popular linking of gender violence and petro-violence through the description of resource extraction as rape is in keeping with Indigenous and pre-modern conceptions of earth as mother and compounded by the phallic and penetrative technologies used by oil workers. As Carolyn Merchant demonstrates in The Death of Nature, the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a misogynist and colonial project that undermined earlier organismic land relations of balance, respect, and reciprocity in order to turn the animate Mother Earth into dead, inert nature, “a passive receptor of human rape” (39); it established land relations that capitalism and modernity still use to exploit the land and accumulate capital. Merchant remarks, however, that “the organismic perspective has by no means disappeared. It has remained as an important underlying tension” (288). The persistence of the rape metaphor in critiques of extraction is an example of that tension. Michael Watts characterizes petro-violence as both “ecological violence” and “social violence” (189). Heather Turcotte has argued further for the desegregation of our thinking about gender violence and petro-violence: her framework of “petro-sexual politics” considers that “gender violence is not merely an effect of petro-violence, it is the necessary condition for such violence to even take place” (201). From this perspective, the idea is not that gender violence is a result of an oil worker’s pain or his difficult working conditions, but rather that it is the root cause of the violence.

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105 See Kainai filmmaker Elle-Maijá Tailfeathers’s film Bloodland, which depicts drilling for oil as drilling into the body of a woman.
The poem “Surviving” evokes gender violence and suggests that oil work pays the bills but threatens Naden’s emotional survival:

My thoughts turn to nature and it knots my brain
As I play my part to punch holes in her frame
It’s for the money
It’s for the life
So I can afford the things
I want for my wife

............................
It’s a hard life when you grow to hate your actions
You pack that weight until your back is cracking[.] (72)

Using graphic, physical imagery, Parkin presents contrary infatuation as painful for oil workers. The persona’s pain is located at the intersection of his disempowerment as a worker, his concern for the earth and respect for women, and his role in perpetrating violence on Mother Earth. In these lines, the persona acknowledges that respect for Mother Earth, like respect for women, is something he is willing to compromise in the tug-of-war of interpellation and contrary infatuation. Notably, he presents care for Mother Earth and care for his wife as making contrary demands: having a wife to buy things for makes him do violence to another woman, the earth he “punches holes” in, using imagery that calls up oil wells and domestic violence at the same time. Parkin shows that petromodernity puts the physically and emotionally dirty work of extraction (the work that is both backbreaking and heartbreaking) on the oil worker. The persona’s honesty about the conflict between his relationship with the oil and gas industry and his relationship with the earth exposes the truth that the subject position reserved for the oil worker in petromodernity is toxic—bad for the earth, bad for women, and bad for the self. Parkin demonstrates this truth imperfectly, not fully making the links himself—yet, the poems about

106 See my discussion of “punching holes” in one of Mathew Henderson’s poems, beginning on page 140.
petro-violence as gender violence show that the stereotype of the hypermasculine oil worker is not adequate to express the mud man’s motivations or who he feels that he really is.

Despite his sense of solidarity with other oil workers, I note in Parkin’s poetics a disidentification with the subject position of the oil worker that is in keeping with the petrocultural disidentifications in Peter Christensen’s and Mathew Henderson’s poetry (see chapter 2). Interpellated to represent the oil industry as a “good” oil worker subject who fully identifies with the oil industry and who embodies ecological and gender violence (as if it were solely his fault), Parkin sometimes accepts and sometimes refuses the terms of such an identification. He recognizes that oil work is always both blessing (as a source of income) and curse (as making him perpetrate violence on the land that is also his home). Parkin’s exposure of a mud man’s contrary infatuations is a performance of disidentification. In another version of disidentification, he uses the language of slavery to register his lack of agency in a situation where he sees no alternative to oil work and where he recognizes that it is not oil workers but the corporate elite who should be held responsible for ecocide and climate change.

“Blue Collar Mayhem” is exemplary of both Parkin’s hip-hop poetics and his insight into a truth he has learned through his relationship with oil:

I’ve grown to hate this daily race for the paper
Raping nature
Just so my pockets ain’t vacant.
Naden’s tainted
Can you blame him?
My face stays straight but inside its cave-ins
There’s shame in my veins for remaining a layman[.] (53)

Parkin’s use of rhyme, assonance, and rhythm in these lines is impressive. Several of the rhyming words he uses here are repeated in the collection as rhymes with Naden, adding layers

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107 The rhymes between paper, nature, vacant, tainted, blame him, cave-ins, and layman are all slant rhymes that may be forced in oral performance. In Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop, Adam Bradley calls forced rhymes
and depth to the persona, such as the line “Tainted, jaded, hatred, painted” in “Love Can Kill Ya” (20). The statement and question “Naden’s tainted / Can you blame him?” are central to the book, with the unanswered question implying that Parkin both is and is not responsible for the impacts of his oil work. Given the emotional pain that Parkin describes the oil worker enduring, including the “shame” that he associates here with both his work and his working-class identity, I am reluctant to “blame him.” Holding the oil worker responsible for the extractive work he does on behalf of the fossil economy we all participate in is punitive and unfair, and Parkin has shown that it is too much for him to bear. The persona sets up the question so that the reader—“you”—will not blame him.

The persona ends “Blue Collar Mayhem” by dismissing the alternatives to oil work and describing himself as an energy slave, chained to extractive work that pays more than any other job he would be qualified to do:

God please say when ends meet on minimum wages
Until then
I guess I’m just caged in
My family name has been slaves since days of cave men,
I ache
I just want to break this chain and
Erase the Parkin’s day in this blue collar mayhem. (53-54)

When he calls his family and himself “slaves” (see also 9-10, 59), the persona uses a common metaphor through which workers refer to themselves as slaves or their work as slaving.108

“transformative rhymes”: “Transformative rhymes start with words that only partially rhyme or don’t rhyme at all and alter the pronunciation to fashion perfect rhymes” (71). He gives the example of Kanye West’s rhyming of “collagen” and “apolagin’” in “Can’t Tell Me Nothing” (73). Because hip-hop is an oral form, it does not matter how the rhyme looks on the page: whether the rhyme is forced or merely a slant rhyme depends on how Parkin pronounces the words in performance. Parkin uses assonance between hate, daily, race, paper, raping nature, ain’t, vacant, Naden, tainted, blame, face stays straight, cave-ins, shame, veins, remaining, and layman. He also uses matching trochaic metre in the lines “Raping nature,” “Naden’s tainted,” and “Can you blame him?” to make the rhymes seem fuller than they are.

108 See Tracy et al., where the metaphor of the slave is considered among the “naturally occurring metaphors” (150) (by which they mean unsolicited metaphors) of abused and bullied workers; and the Oxford English Dictionary definitions of slave as noun and verb that include “One whose condition in respect of toil is comparable to that of a
Parkin’s reference to “chain” recalls Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s phrase, “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains” (121). Tom Wayman describes current working conditions virtually everywhere as “servitude” (If You’re Not Free xiii), as a situation in which the worker is unfree. Chen describes the problem of the “alienated labourer,” likewise, as an animacy problem (46). With the position and the relative power of the worker existing on a scale that (as Soyinka demonstrates) ranges from actual slavery to more democratic forms like workers’ co-operatives or self-employment, a worker’s description of themself as a slave is an indication that their work is dehumanizing. Parkin makes frequent and explicit references to work, capital, and class that reveal a hip-hop-influenced and historically aware class consciousness. For example, he calls himself one of those “Born poor grunts” (64), “used as the means to an end” (66) in a system where “[t]his world’s horny and the poor get fucked first” (37). Instead of “chains,” Parkin wears a working-class version of the “golden handcuffs,” another slavery metaphor more commonly used to describe upper- and middle-class workers (see Devin Martin): his well-paying oil job affords him all kinds of middle-class comforts, as long as he continues to do the work of oil extraction, work where his role in climate change and ecological damage is painfully apparent, and where he must “[risk his] limbs for fistfuls of twenties” (33). He wishes for an end to his exploitation—his “slaving and hammering” (59)—and he also wishes not to be one of the ones to do the dangerous, painful, dirty work of exploiting the land.

By equating human slavery with capitalist exploitation of the working class, and in particular with the exploitation of oil workers, Parkin extends the reach of the metaphor of the energy slave in ways that Nikiforuk is careful to avoid. Social historian Kaveh Ehsani writes that

slave” and “To toil or work hard like a slave,” respectively. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels write in The Communist Manifesto, “Not only are [labourers] slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overseer, and above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself” (88). I notice that the language of enslavement comes up often in contemporary writing about work.
Nikiforuk’s study of the energy slave “fails to take into consideration the labor of people who actually produce this new labor-saving energy, or how they are affected by the subsequent modern day forms of servitude” (24). Indeed, as I have already mentioned, Nikiforuk does not consider the metaphor of the energy slave in relation to oil workers. When he writes that “North Americans now live on credit to support their own energy slaves and to buy largely unnecessary goods created by other energy slaves” (72), however, at least some of the slaves he refers to must be humans, not only hydrocarbons or machines, and maybe some of them are oil workers. Bob Johnson writes, “The trouble with how the metaphor of mechanical slavery has been deployed is that it steers the mind away from the persistence of physical labor in the current fossil economy while stripping the terms slavery, servitude, and exploitation of their ability to connote socially specific types of suffering” (“Energy Slave” 974). Nikiforuk’s avoidance of this topic is a way of managing and minimizing discomfort for himself and his readers, yet it also avoids seriously considering Girvan’s who, what, and how of the connections between energy and slavery. Parkin’s adoption of the metaphor to describe his exploitation and disempowerment exposes the resonances and the stakes involved in calling oil workers energy slaves.

As expressed in the alienating imperative for oil workers in an oil boom to “say goodbye to your family, say good bye to your friends / ‘And get the fuck back to work!’ with your head down” (Parkin, Relationship 52), Parkin sees how he is expendable to extractive industry, used as an almost-inanimate source of labour and a “tool” (Henderson 8), replaceable like a worn-out drill bit. Calling himself a slave links the extractive work the persona does on behalf of the oil

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109 Nikiforuk makes oblique connections to oil work through his references to subaltern humans who work “under slave-like conditions” in factories (Energy 165) or as temporary foreign workers in petrostates, including Alberta (185).
110 In an exception that speaks to the racial unconscious of the text, Nikiforuk refers to energy slaves in China as “coolies” (Energy 65), humanizing and situating the energy slave by using a term with a racializing and racist etymology (“coolie, n.”).
industry with his sense that his labour is also being extracted by a class of “the richest guys / Who bitch and cry over misplaced dimes” (9). As Yusoff demonstrates, extractivism has always been about extracting not only minerals but also labour. In Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore’s terms, the oil patch is a frontier, a site of the cheapening of nature, work, and lives in order to accumulate capital. The industry that employs Parkin is not concerned about his wellbeing, his happiness, or his home in the oil patch, The persona’s experience of being treated like “an expendable machine” (Christensen 32), as if his life and way of life were overburden (see Wenzel, “Improvement”), is indeed dehumanizing and de-animating. Parkin uses the language of [energy] slavery to gesture toward a class politics for oil workers. Like the other oil-worker poets I study, he is acutely aware of both the hypocrisy of our oil-addicted and guilt-ridden petrocultures and his own complicity, but he refuses to bear responsibility that belongs to oil and gas executives, governments, and other elites. Mitchell Beer and The Energy Mix call fossil-fuel corporations and elites “fossils,” implying both that they are outdated or regressive and that they are stonelike in their indifference to the suffering of others. The class politics of A Relationship with Truth is its proposal to hold accountable the “fossils” rather than the workers.

Yet, in order to highlight this politics, I have delayed observing that Parkin’s use of the energy slave is not immune to the uncomfortable energy unconscious of the energy slave metaphor. By evoking the energy slave from inside the working class, the primarily Black idiom of hip-hop, and his sense of being a native of the oil patch, Parkin not only compares oil workers to enslaved and dispossessed people but also appropriates their suffering as if it were his own. Parkin’s references to slavery serve to demonstrate the ways in which the concept of the energy slave resonates with an oil worker’s experience, and also the significant problems, discomforts, and limitations of its use. Having felt the discomfort of writing about the energy slave myself, I
suggest that Parkin might also have felt uncomfortable. I consider *A Relationship with Truth* to have an energy unconscious that undermines the privilege of the white settler.

Beginning with the subtitle that describes both Parkin and the poetry as *Born in the Canadian Oil Patch*, the persona represents himself throughout *A Relationship with Truth* as loving and belonging to the land. His positioning as native to the oil patch blends settler-colonial land claims (see Fee) into his care for the earth. For example, through references to his “oil patch blood” (7) and “pure” blood (55), the persona makes claims not only to belong to the working class, the North, and the oil patch, but also to be entitled to white privilege, to a settler-colonial heritage, and to the land itself. Similarly, Parkin’s “heart of gold” (22; 23; 39-40; 43), a recurring symbol of his goodness, also comes from the land. Echoing rock star-activist Neil Young’s song “Heart of Gold,” with its line “I’ve been a miner for a heart of gold,” the persona’s heart turns to gold as he emerges from a demon-filled abyss in the fantasy poem “The Pit” (21-22).

Although both Young and Parkin use extractive metaphors, Young’s description of a lifelong process of “searching for a heart of gold” reveals that a heart of gold is more properly described as being made through ongoing relationship with the land, not as a property or possession that can be taken from it. The persona’s love for the land he knows as the oil patch is the ground of his concern for the earth and his serious problems with his oil work, but he struggles to imagine ways other than extractive ones to relate to the land. His self-definition as native to the oil patch most often takes the form of identification with the land through his sense of dispossession and endangerment, but he has a hunch that an older history of human and animal relationships with the same place may offer other truths about how to relate to the land.

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111 An environmental, anti-war, and Indigenous-rights activist, Young visited the oil sands and the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN) in September 2013, then did an “Honour the Treaties” tour to benefit the legal defence fund for the ACFN in January 2014. He made explicit statements criticizing the tar sands at both times (see Young, “Neil Young Blasts”; Klinkenberg and Ibrahim).
In one of the untitled poem fragments scattered throughout the book, Parkin considers the wood bison who used to graze in the places where he lives and works: “A flat land with a painted sky / Graced by the great herds / But all the grazers died” (17). This fragment conveys sorrow at the near extinction of the wood bison. Yet, it uses odd, passive phrasing to describe their deaths as if they died on their own and were not killed. As James Daschuk shows in his material history of the dispossession and subjugation of Indigenous peoples in the plains of North America, white traders, bureaucrats, missionaries, and governments encouraged the overhunting of the bison in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to provision their workers and settlements, then leveraged the resulting famines, epidemics, and conflicts to appropriate territory and power from Indigenous peoples. Parkin’s passive phrasing is symptomatic of the erasures and omissions of settler Canadian memory. The following lines from “As the Moon Creeps” parallel the earlier lines about the grazers, in their reference to the land, their sorrowful tone, and their passive phrasing: “I was birthed on a small farm, / What gave me worth was that dirt, / But now it’s all gone” (52). The unusual phrase “I was birthed,” which Parkin uses to rhyme with worth and dirt, and also perhaps to suggest earth, attributes the action of Parkin’s arrival to the one who gave him birth—his mother—but also to the land, the “small farm.” Here we see Parkin’s sense of connection to Mother Earth as a kind of truth, but also an indication that he thinks of himself, metaphorically, as an endangered species—one of the grazers—rather than one of the hunters or settlers. As Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood have argued, this understanding of the self as threatened and as a victim is typical of settler-Canadian literature.

Parkin considers how the land and his own life have been altered through transitions between extractive regimes in the Staples economy, as in “Her Cost”: “From the furs to the farm
to the rigs to the dark / That churns in the earth until it’s burned in my thoughts” (42). In this example where the persona admits that he would harm the earth (in whatever resource economy comes next) to earn money for his dream girl, he also links the reterritorializations of the land with his family’s loss of the farm, his exploitation as an oil worker, and his anxiety about what the next reterritorialization might do to his future. Unconsciously, he fears the next, inevitable, transition from the oil patch mode of production to something else—something he cannot imagine but refers to only as “the dark.” The energy transition to come makes the oil worker an endangered species and threatens his new family like the earlier transition threatened his old one. The unknown “dark” at the end of the trajectory from fur trade to oil patch is paralleled by a prior territorialization that Parkin leaves in the dark: its existence as sovereign Indigenous territory that precedes and is concurrent with each of the other versions. The knowledge and traditions of the white settler fail him: he cannot imagine the land either before or after the colonial and extractive regimes that have redefined it.

The persona also uses references to Indigenous people to support his sense of belonging to the land. In “Something Inside,” he figures himself as an Indigenous warrior:

I’ll saddle up painted, and wage war for the slaves,
Until I’m ancient
Not just Africans, Asians or Canadians,
I’m speaking to the working class Homo sapiens. (10)

His claim that his class warfare in verse is colourblind is undermined by his use of the trope of the Noble Savage that Robert Berkhofer Jr. shows white people have used for centuries to critique European or settler-colonial culture while also reinforcing white supremacy. I find these dynamics interesting in relationship to the way the persona connects his sense of being enslaved with an unnameable something inside the self: “Something’s, making me shout it’s, eating me

112 See also Parkin 10; 36; 55.
up, / Beating me down and freaking me out” (10). It is possible to read this *something* as settler colonialism. In the poem “Groundbirch Camp,” the persona tells a story in which “some old Native woman” tells him, “Your old soul glows like it’s gold dust, / Expose it, and the whole world will notice” (43). The Native woman’s words serve neoliberal, settler-colonial ends, promising Parkin fame and success; and her Indigeneity and recognition of the persona’s “old soul” serve to make him also seem Indigenous. Adam Gaudry and Chris Anderson argue that the strategy of “Self-Indigenization” among white Canadians who feel “[marginal] in an era of economic stagnation” is “far from innocent”: “It claims to circumvent colonialism as it transforms many Canadians into Indians and Métis, who are no longer the beneficiaries of Indigenous dispossession, but part of the dispossessed themselves” (27). The illegitimacy of Parkin’s claim to indigeneity is the same as the problem with describing oneself as an energy slave: although fossil fuels may be both a blessing and a curse to residents of the oil patch, a settler’s equation of his sense of dispossession or of belonging with Indigenous experiences and knowledges obscures the very real differentials in the distribution of resource blessings and curses. Parkin’s relationship with the land should not displace or appropriate others’ relationships or their pain.

In his poetry, Parkin expresses grief about the negative impacts of oil extraction on the land he loves and demonstrates a desire to become indigenous to the place he knows as the oil patch. Potawatomi biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer argues in *Braiding Sweetgrass* that “becoming indigenous to a place” is an appropriate way for settlers to respond to both ecocide and their own sense of alienation from the land (9). Yet, the extractive, colonial naming of the land as *oil patch* gets in the way of reciprocal land relations. Only a decolonial relationship with

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113 “Groundbirch Camp” likely refers to a work camp adjacent to Shell’s Groundbirch project on Treaty 8 land and the traditional territory of the West Moberley First Nations near Dawson Creek, BC (“Groundbirch”),
the land as teacher and home will offer the kinds of truths that Parkin seems to be unconsciously looking for. It requires engaging with the temporality he calls “the dark,” a decolonized world transitioned away from fossil fuels. Kyle Powys Whyte contends that Indigenous peoples already live in a “post-apocalyptic situation” (160); like Yusoff’s “billion Black Anthropocenes,” Whyte characterizes Indigenous people as already having survived the end of the world. He describes Indigenous peoples in North America as thinking of time on the scale of 10,000 years into the past and the future, so that “Indigenous conceptions of the future often present striking contrasts between deep Indigenous histories and the brief, but highly disruptive colonial, capitalist, and industrial periods” (159). Canadian settler colonialism has relegated traditional Indigenous knowledge to “the dark”—marginalizing, demonizing, and criminalizing it, and targeting it for extermination. Yet, unlike the short colonial histories whose effects Parkin can trace on the land, Indigenous knowledge extends far into the past and future; it has the capacity to unravel the extractive framings of the land as oil patch, farmland, and fur trade. Traditional Indigenous knowledge can address problems like climate change, energy transition, and land reclamation in radical ways that must not be appropriated or adapted to serve or fix extractivist culture.

Becoming indigenous to the land now known as the oil patch is a decolonial project that involves addressing the effects of previous extractive and colonial economies, honouring treaties, and decolonizing the very presence of the settler by becoming what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang call immigrants instead of occupiers, “beholden to the Indigenous laws and epistemologies of the lands they migrate to” (6). Decolonization involves returning the land and the future to Indigenous people. Such a “reparation ecology” (Patel and Moore 43), which would also involve a different definition and valuation of work, is difficult for settlers to imagine. Of course, I am not suggesting that Parkin has it all figured out, but rather that this radical way of resolving the
contrary infatuations of an oil worker is suggested through the energy unconscious of *A Relationship with Truth*. Decolonization surfaces as another relationship the oil worker can engage in, a way of “searching for a heart of gold” amid uncertainty and transition.

In *Global Warming and the Sweetness of Life*, Matt Hern and Am Johal hold together commitments to environmentalism, decolonization including a “thoroughly renovated land politics,” and solidarity with workers. They write, “We are convinced that linking the domination of people to the domination of land and the other-than-human world is a key to grasping an ecological future” (30). These links, missing for the most part in Nikiforuk’s use of the metaphor of the energy slave, are central to Parkin’s personal and at times painfully honest poetry. My reading of *A Relationship with Truth* as bringing together a mud man’s contrary perspectives as oil worker and lover of the land and as having a decolonial energy unconscious is influenced by Hern and Johal’s analysis. They write, thinking about environmental and social justice for Indigenous people and workers together,

> Ecology cannot rest on shame and discipline; it has to offer an affirmative vision of change and a future that is material. A sweetness of life has to present itself as a living alternative to those who are being buffeted by incredible anxiety, volatility, and debt. Supporting Indigenous land struggles and land justice movements is not just a question of justice; it opens up space for all of us to imagine a different way of being in the world. (172)

Parkin’s vulnerable poetry challenges readers “immersed in facts” to consider the relational aspects of climate change—our entanglements and responsibilities, and what it might look like for all of us, including oil workers, to enjoy “the sweetness of life.”

When the persona says, “Naden’s tainted / Can you blame him?” (53), it occurs to me that simply not blaming Naden does little to relieve the worker’s pain or to address his dehumanizing relationship with oil work. It also does not require the reader to do anything, or to accept any responsibility ourselves. I wonder what it would be like instead to hold both Parkin and the self
“response-able,” in Donna Haraway’s sense of having “the capacity to respond” (*Staying* 78). Haraway frames response-ability within a praxis of “staying with the trouble,” based in an understanding of planetary life as being “entwined rather than individualized” (*Staying* 1). This resonates with the concept of having *A Relationship with Truth* (or with oil, the land, and planetary or geologic life). In the face of feelings of both complicity and disempowerment, response-ability searches for ethical responses for both oil workers and oil consumers. Accounting for our response-abilities also involves holding others accountable, especially corporate, financial, and political elites. As the decolonial energy unconscious of *A Relationship with Truth* reveals, the class politics that Parkin articulates through his evocation of the energy slave must also be a decolonial politics of response-ability.

**Conclusion**

Battler’s impersonal and language-based poetics and Parkin’s personal poetics of lyrical exposure each expand, complicate, and critique the *who, what, and how* of the energy slave metaphor, using forms appropriate to the writers’ oil work and lived experiences. Battler mimics and remixes the images and language of energy slavery to expose Nikiforuk’s inadequate account of the links between the categorization of humans and fossil fuels as inhuman and inanimate. In the context of a mud man’s conflicted relationships with oil and the land, as well as his sense of dispossession and disempowerment, Parkin calls himself an energy slave; this conscious exposure sets in motion an unconscious poor theory for a decolonial class politics. Following Girvan’s suggestion, I have considered the “metaphorical struggles” with the energy slave that these texts elucidate as “pressing theoretical and practical work” (22) related to petromodernity and energy transition. Both poetry collections link extractive land relations with
extractive and dehumanizing labour relations; in my reading, both point to the need not only for a shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources but also for a more fundamental shift to respectful and response-able relationships with hydrocarbons, workers, Indigenous people, racialized and dehumanized people, and the land.
Conclusion: Who Are We Fighting?

My first Petrocultures conference was the fall 2016 conference held in St. John’s, Newfoundland. After the conference, I found the experience of waiting alongside other attendees in the small St. John’s airport unnerving: were we just going to smile and shrug at one another until the call came for each of us to take our greedy gulps of hydrocarbons, enjoying petromodern freedom and cheapness while we still can? Were we going to sit near one another on the plane to Toronto, buckled into ubiquitous positions of complicity and guilt? Yes, it turned out, we were. Maybe I felt it more acutely than others, having recently returned to graduate school after spending a couple of years editing an activist magazine where we swore off air travel and celebrated low-carbon, DIY living: it’s the bad feeling of being exposed as a hypocrite. It’s the abject experience that poet David Martin calls “beholding yourself bound to yourself in the tar cage” (88). Oil winks at us as we organize, study, and dream for climate justice, and as we continue to meet our basic needs, commute to work, visit our loved ones, and take vacations. Like the cell phone in Dymphny Dronyk’s poem “Love by Cell Phone” that serves to connect the speaker almost instantly with her lover but that also makes her constantly available for her oil-industry job, oil is always right there with me, “always here / in my pocket, / riding beside me” (Dronyk 91). As I have pursued my PhD studies, travelling to conferences, archives, and courses in North America and Europe, the awkward airport moment—an exposure of some of my “contrary infatuations” (Dronyk)—has now been repeated several times. It still feels uncomfortable, but it gets easier. You get used to it, and not only in the sense of becoming numb or indifferent (although that is a serious problem). There is a kind of solidarity that I feel when I expose myself as both an environmental humanist and a non-innocent oil consumer, when flying shifts from being a private, guilty pleasure to a public practice and a no-longer-
disavowed material condition of my work and my life. Admitting my contrary infatuations works against the idea that only the purest among us qualify to dissent against petromodernity and allows me to see the other people at the airport as potential allies in imagining, producing, and demanding energy transition and systemic change.

Energy humanities scholar Jennifer Wenzel wouldn’t mind me saying that she was one of the people I waited with that day in the St. John’s airport. Wenzel begins her essay “How to Read for Oil” with a confession: she admits, “I love to fly.” Despite what it might seem to be based on its title, Wenzel’s essay is not a how-to guide for literary criticism in the energy humanities. Instead, it describes Wenzel’s experience teaching an undergraduate course on Literature and Oil and encouraging her students “to think honestly and capaciously about oil, not only as an unfortunate necessity for so many aspects of everyday life, but also as a source of pleasure, even desire.” Wenzel uses her admission that she loves to fly as a way to foster honest conversation that pushes back at the seeming invisibility of oil. She shows that we can read not only literary texts but also our own lives for oil, and that the study of petrocultures involves thinking about “the intensely personal and the geopolitical” together.

When she taught the Literature and Oil course at the University of Michigan, Wenzel gave her students an essay assignment to make an “oil inventory,” to give an account of themselves in relation to oil. I read Wenzel’s essay shortly after returning from Newfoundland, when I was just getting to know the field of petrocultures while writing the proposal for this dissertation, and when I was also facing my annual one-a-day artmaking commitment for the month of October. So, I gave myself the same assignment, except in verse: write an oil inventory, in a line or two a day. I repeated the assignment again in October 2017. The resulting poems are documents of my entanglement, dependency, love, and disidentification with oil.
Oil Inventory October 2016

Ollie, that’s long for oil
hello, styrofoam
white silver blue beige white blue blue
all the light colours
my other bike is an SUV
car car car car car car car car
drive heavy bags of overdue books to the library
then bus to campus

Main St. underpass, scan train cars
no black ones, only wheat
make a dash through the North End
the only way I ever pass here
once a day I find the river and breathe in deep
my-way-or-the-highway kinda guy
asphalt in my boot: tarfoot

When I wake in the night to comfort my child
oil is there with us in the warm bed
we thought it was blood but it was oil
beside your head as we talked on the bus
the tank cars scrolled by

Passed out gummy candy for hours without eating one
but my kids hand over the peanut butter cups when they get home
yellow 5 + 6 synthetic B6 red 3 + 40 TBHQ
ethyl methylphenylglycidate methyl benzoate mineral oil paraffin wax
even after I read the wrapper I ate another

Back from the groomer Ollie tracked blood all over the house
we’ve both seen the spill—
the red cup I tip and pour
the vein tapped and left open, dipped
in muddy puddles
when I have cramps like this I go for a drive
the heated seats on my legs my back

The river shrugs off the city, makes it hum
I am turning—no I am inside the car that turns
No one asks how we got here, no one offers a ride
Oil Inventory October 2017

not the fullest I’ve ever been
not the only pipeline project in the works not sorry
Energy East death pins oil sands hopes on two troubled pipelines
Kinder Morgan Canada kills
like it or not the oilsand are a national project and you’re a stakeholder
take a pill, oil patch

count gratitude beads on a plastic thread
my family my dog the cancelled line
put oil on my thanksgiving list a lump of coal
is the passenger less responsible?
count 33 black cars on the train at Omand’s Creek
my neighbourhood Lac-Mégantic

waking ok good walking good
eat salmon from Alaska eat Exxon Valdez eat Fukushima microplastics be grateful
money laundering and windmills: Canada’s remaining economic engines
made a list of everything I said no to this week
woke to snow on the roofs the ground the cars on the street
driving and dancing with my mind stayed on Jesus

necessity defence
no one pulls a gas pump from its cradle wondering whether they are filling up
with light sweet crude from Saudi Arabia or the Niger Delta
deepwater deposit pumped from two miles under the Gulf of Mexico
or an upgraded barrel of synthetic crude from Alberta’s oil sands

this is the truth ok?
I drive like a climate change denier
under the overpass loaded with oil cars
well-meaning Cenovus ad campaigns
when the industry speaks of its bright future, this is what it imagines:
an oil patch that’s more like Silicon Valley than Saudi Arabia
where will the oil go?

heat’s on, has been for weeks
High Pressure Natural Gas Pipeline
Call before you dig
laundry gardening yardwork
shopping + reading + napping
IF YOU LIKE THIS YOU LIKE OIL
cover my head like Mamie Ludwig: I was raised for this

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114 October 2017 Sources: Google Alerts notifications for “enbridge line 3,” “energy east pipeline,” “northern gateway pipeline,” and “trans mountain pipeline”; Kalmanovitch; Turner (143; 253; 291); York.
Many Canadians, especially those of us who live and work at a remove from the oil industry and from oil extraction, fail to take inventories of what hydrocarbons mean to us, what they have given us, and how we are, as Kathryn Yusoff describes us, “geologic subjects” and collaborators with fossil fuels (“Geologic” 781). In the terms I have used throughout this dissertation, we often fail to account for petropoetics. As the Petrocultures Research Group writes in *After Oil*, “post-industrial society today is an oil society through and through. It is shaped by oil in physical and material ways, from the automobiles and highways we use to the plastics that permeate our food supply and built environments. Even more significantly, fossil fuels have also shaped our values, practices, habits, beliefs, and feelings” (9). I like how the “Oil Inventory” poems link my body and physical life (sleep, illness, menstruation, eating, walking), my location (my home and workplace, my neighbourhood), my vocation (my commute to campus, the books I was reading), my private and professional spheres, and the passage of time (through the arrival of Hallowe’en, Thanksgiving, and autumn, and the cycles of month to month, year to year). Although the tone of the writing is often bleak, the poems also highlight the many loves—a warm house, going to school, peanut butter cups, mobility—that mean that I love oil, in the sense of Wenzel’s paraphrasing of Stephanie LeMenager, of “a deep attachment not to the substance itself but rather to all of the things that oil makes possible” (“How”).

The “Oil Inventory” poems expose my interpellation as an oil subject, through the equation that I lifted from Tanya Kalmanovitch’s *Tar Sands Songbook*: “IF YOU LIKE THIS YOU LIKE OIL.” In my conversation with the oil sands worker in Fort McMurray (see page 4), in the videos my dear aunt from Calgary posts on Facebook, and in public discourse, I am constantly asked how I can have anything bad to say about oil, if I like being able to see through my glasses, if I
like running, if I like cuddling with my children in a warm bed, if I like road trips and bananas and TV. The logic is that I became an oil subject while I wasn’t paying attention—I took the flight, I ate the food, I drove the car when I could have walked—and now criticizing “petromodernity” (LeMenager 67) would mean criticizing myself and being hypocritical: it is too late to resist. In the era of climate change and the Anthropocene, petromodern ideology uses “purity narratives” (Konso and Recollet 213) to demand that only those with clean hands—in other words, virtually no-one—can be critical of the oil and gas industry. Dronyk’s speaker becomes stuck in this awareness of complicity, of what a person cannot do or say because of the “big truck / in the yard” or “the purr of your furnace / switching on” (82). Alexis Shotwell writes in Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times,

[Purism] is a common approach for anyone who attempts to meet and control a complex situation that is fundamentally outside our control. It is a bad approach because it shuts down precisely the field of possibility that might allow us to take better collective action against the destruction of the world in all its strange, delightful, impure frolic. Purism is a de-collectivizing, de-mobilizing, paradoxical politics of despair. This world deserves better. (8-9)

Purism works against solidarity and collective action by emphasizing individuals’ compromised and compromising choices as determinants of what their politics can be. At the same time, the idea that we are all guilty and complicit leads to a collective version of disempowerment that Andreas Malm describes in relation to the Anthropocene: “If humanity as a whole drives the locomotive, there is no one to depose. A revolt against business-as-usual becomes inconceivable” (389). For either individuals or a collective of undifferentiated Anthropocene humans, purity narratives are depoliticizing and serve the status quo. Shotwell proposes, instead, “if we want a world with less suffering and more flourishing, it would be useful to perceive complexity and complicity as the constitutive situation of our lives, rather than as things we should avoid” (8). The “Oil Inventory” poems reach for more capacious ways to talk about oil
for people who like or even love oil but also recognize the harmful ecological and social
relations of petromodernity and want to do something about it. This reaching is something that
my poems have in common with the oil worker poetry I study in this dissertation.

Matthew Huber argues in *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* that an
individualized, neoliberal version of freedom that he calls “entrepreneurial life” (xiv) grew up
alongside oil infrastructure in America. As Huber describes,

> Individuals may believe that the oil industry is corrupt, profiteering, or responsible for
> massive ecological destruction, but the logic of entrepreneurial life suggests that what
> matters most are your individual life choices—especially in the sphere of the market—
> and it is in those very practices one cannot help but purchase, use, and enjoy petroleum
> products. From plastics, to synthetic fibers; from asphalt to engine lubricants, life,
> home, travel, family, leisure, and freedom—all are rendered impossible without access
to this one magical commodity, petroleum. . . . Thus, according to the logic that what
matters most is what you do with your “life,” all forms of opposition [are] essentially
ridiculed as hypocritical by the forces of capital. (160)

Huber demonstrates the extent to which modern life is saturated with oil. Entanglement makes
all of us oil subjects and oil workers, for example, as we reproduce the “fossil economy” (Malm
4) by purchasing and consuming hydrocarbons; as our CO₂ emissions and plastic waste shape the
atmosphere, geology, and the oceans; and as our bodies absorb, digest, and work on
hydrocarbons in our cosmetics, food, and pharmaceuticals. Neoliberal-petromodern ideology
gives the illusion of freedom, as long as subjects choose among the options on offer. Meanwhile,
any resistance to the dual dominance of neoliberalism and the fossil economy registers as
hypocritical because the resistant subject is indebted to and entangled with fossil fuels, and
because modern life is virtually unimaginable without oil.

Huber demonstrates that the freedoms of the market and of the individual that
neoliberalism enshrines are illusory. Access to cheap fossil fuels can only be guaranteed through
regulation, inequity, and war, through the
that Lesley Battler’s poem “Peak Oil Exile” shows underlying and existing alongside the petrofictions of the oil industry (Endangered 102). Entrepreneurial life offers workers and citizens control over the means of social reproduction (the home, the private car, the choice of which commodities to purchase), while keeping control over the means of production in the hands of corporations and elites (Huber, Lifeblood 64). Entrepreneurial life has racial, class, gender, and geographical politics—at the local, national, and global levels—that exclude subaltern subjects from the promise of freedom, while simultaneously blaming them for having made bad choices. In his history of the United States as a Carbon Nation, Bob Johnson presents the seeming freedoms of the middle class as dependent upon the unfreedom of the working class:

[In order to live with fossil fuels, the nation’s middle class learned to bury the human and environmental costs of its dependencies out of sight both geographically and socially in the working-class geographies of the coal mine and stokehole and to repress the many traumas and dislocations associated with fossil fuels both psychically and symbolically within a national narrative of progress, emancipation, and empowerment that had little room for modernity’s objections and casualties” (xx).]
Although fossil fuels have been liberating for some people, for subaltern and working-class subjects, “[s]weaty and demanding physical labour intensified” in the carbon nation (49). The “primitive accumulation of fossil capital” (Malm 291) is characterized by danger, toxicity, and unfreedom; it takes place in the sublimated spaces that Johnson calls “modernity’s basement” (xv), out of sight or easily ignored by everyone except the workers and other marginalized people. As Peter Christensen writes in “Elegy for a Rig Worker,” few people “ever stop to think” that their consumptive habits are possible “because somebody / stood and froze their ass off / in the steel” (Rig 32).

Also sublimated in a settler-colonial state like the US or Canada is another, prior form of primitive accumulation: the illegitimate appropriation of land that belongs to Indigenous people. Glen Sean Coulthard identifies such accumulation as ongoing in Canada, despite the state’s rhetoric of the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty or of reconciliation (7). The dispossessed Indigenous people whom S.C. Ells represents as slouching, freeloading, and unemployed on the fringes of the transition to petromodernity are not there by coincidence or by accident: they are the rightful owners and managers of the land. Indigenous people figure in each of the poetry collections I study, not only in the stereotypes of the noble savage or the dying Indian (although such stereotypes are indeed present in many of the texts), but also as carriers of knowledges, traditions, and poetics that resist the land poetics and politics of petromodernity.

In this dissertation, I read poetry collections written by Canadian oil workers as conscious or unconscious oil inventories, written by people who play a vital but sublimated, and often disparaged, role in Canadian petromodernity. Oil work seems to upend class relations and colonial relations. Many workers in the industry benefit from high incomes that afford them the limited freedoms of entrepreneurial life. Indigenous workers and businesses in the oil patch also
benefit economically. Yet, the promise of upward mobility is exaggerated and tenuous, as
evidenced, for example, in the report by Angele Alook et al. that indicates Indigenous labourers
report they are “the ‘last hired [and] first fired’ for any job” (10), also evidenced in the general
precarity faced by oil workers since oil prices dropped beginning in 2014 (Workforce Insights).

Oil extraction workers are often maligned in Canadian culture—as embodying, for example,
crudeness, addiction, consumerist excess, racism, and sexism (see Cornfield; Hussain; Tressa
Moore). They are often perceived, falsely, as the greatest beneficiaries of the oil industry, despite
the dangerous work that they do, their long work hours and commutes, and the disparity
between their incomes and those of their CEOs. The precarity of their employment registers
when they are also recognized as those who stand to suffer most in a transition away from the
fossil-fuel economy or a drop in oil prices. Low oil prices beginning in 2014 led to a 25 percent
reduction of employment in the industry (Workforce in Transition 3), and while the industry has
recovered somewhat and rehired some workers, it has also used restructuring and automation to
permanently eliminate jobs, while creating new, more technical work in the fields of automation
and data analytics (see Workforce in Transition 4; Workforce Insights 9). Seventy percent of
respondents to a 2017 Petroleum Labour Market Information (PetroLMI) survey of former,

115 Oil workers are six times more likely than the average worker to commute to another province for work, and
almost two times more likely to have no fixed workplace (Canada’s Oil and Gas: Distribution 12).
116 Beginning in 2018, public companies in the United States must disclose the ratio of CEO pay to median worker
pay. The Houston Chronicle reported on the 2017 figures that the salaries of the “highest-paid” CEOs of energy
companies based or working in Houston averaged $17 million, 150 times more than average employee pay, with the
ratios ranging from 108 to 935 (Eaton, “CEO”). According to a Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives report on
the top 100 CEO incomes in Canada (where figures include salaries, bonuses, shares, stock options, pension, and
other compensation), Encana Corp president and CEO Doug Suttles made $17,592,105 in 2016, Canadian National
Resources Limited (CNRL) executive chair N. Murray Edwards $11,893,926, Suncor Energy Inc. President and
CEO Steven Williams $11,482,343; Enbridge Inc. President and CEO Al Monaco $11,391,427; TransCanada Corp.
President and CEO Russell Girling $10,138,022; CNRL President Steve Laut $8,239,154; Cenovus Energy Inc.
President and CEO Brian Ferguson $8,041,460; Imperial Oil Ltd. Chairman, President, and CEO Rich Kruger
$7,577,818; and Husky Energy Inc. Former President and CEO Asim Ghosh $6,335,443 (David Macdonald 17-20).
Using the average salary of $125,300 for workers in the industry in the same year (Canada’s Oil and Gas:
Distribution 15), I calculate that these incomes range from 50 to 140 times greater than an average worker’s income.
current, and prospective workers in the oil and gas industry indicated that the downturn had affected their employment (Workforce Insights 2). The situation is most dire for unemployed workers whose skills do not easily transfer to other sectors (3).

Matthew Henderson’s poem “Breakup” describes an annual season of unemployment for oil workers when “the earth soaks to mud too thick for rigs to move,” when “Men lose their trucks in April, cave by May / and pump gas at ten an hour.” Some workers “even go to Lakeside [Packers, a meat plant], work the killing floor” . . . “Run the gun. Avoid the eyes” (The Lease 56). The employment options outside of oil work for the workers in this poem are limited to difficult, low-paid manual labour. Henderson himself used his oil work to pay his way through university, and now teaches creative writing in Toronto. Mud man and poet Naden Parkin writes, “God please say when ends meet on minimum wages / Until then / I guess I’m just caged in” (Relationship 53-54). Parkin describes himself as “A working class man, no multimillions” (42), living in “blue collar mayhem” (54). His class position is cemented by his lack of options to do other work for comparable pay. Oil work remains difficult work that brings oil workers close to the explosive power and the toxicity of hydrocarbons. As Parkin’s and Dronyk’s poetry remind us, furthermore, for many oil workers, the sacrifice zone of the oil patch is home. In an oil boom, workers appear to be the beneficiaries and poster children of entrepreneurial life. They are also easy targets as examples of consumerist excess. In a bust like the current downturn, however, both their grasp on freedom and their options are revealed as tenuous and limited. While the oil and gas industry uses the vulnerability of oil workers and their “oil families” to argue that Canadians must keep the industry healthy (Oil Respect; see also Massie; Fletcher), the industry’s use of the bust to justify automation and the elimination of oil jobs shows that oil companies are not families, they are corporations focused on extraction and maximizing profit. It also shows,
despite the ubiquitous “six-figure salaries” in the industry (Hussain), that both oil work and energy transition are class issues.

The formulation “IF YOU LIKE THIS YOU LIKE OIL,” which I use to consider my own interpellation as an oil subject, summarizes the way oil workers are also interpellated: if they like their jobs, their pay cheques, and their lifestyles, then their loyalty is expected by employers, the industry, and petromodernity itself. Similar expectations are extended to citizens of the Canadian petrostate, where dependency on oil revenues extends the logic of “IF YOU LIKE THIS YOU LIKE OIL” to education, health care, and other social services. Ideology works most effectively when we do not realize we are inside a “tar cage.” It has a forward momentum that Battler represents using stanzas shaped like arrows in the poem “Tender Carbon,” where modern ideas about progress and development carry us forward, undeterred by the increasing scarcity of oil nor by the fact that “all the time there is a single / climate” [Endangered 159], nor “failed Copenhagen talks” (157), “indigenous dignitaries [who] indignantly / re-sign treaty rights” (157), “mutated fish alarms” (158), nor memory of a cleaner earth (159). Once we do realize, however that our very subjectivity serves to reproduce the “established order” of petromodernity (Althusser 63), we recognize ourselves as hypocrites and as complicit, but also, in the theory of petrocultural disidentification that I describe in chapter 2, as potentially disidentificatory, resistant subjects. When Naden Parkin writes, then, that he is “caged in” or that he wants to “rattle the cages of fellow Canadians” (10), he draws attention to the limits and costs of “freedom” in the petrostate. Like Dronyk’s contrary infatuation as a theory of impasse, “beholding yourself bound to yourself in the tar cage” is a prepolitical moment of feeling bad (guilty, hypocritical, complicit) about loving oil: it can lead petromodern subjects to admit defeat
and accept the futility of entrepreneurial life, or it can be the ground for a resistant politics that rejects purism and begins instead from contamination, entanglement, and even (bad) love.

In a 2015 blog post for *Huffington Post*, oil worker Tressa Moore summarizes and then refutes some of the ways in which, at the moment of oil bust, oil workers are blamed, as if the recession happened or they lost their jobs because of their poor choices. She writes, “A lot of the comments I’ve read online are ‘you rig pigs should have went to school,’ ‘bet your jacked up truck payment isn’t so cool now,’ ‘I hope all of you fall flat on your face so I can buy your repo’d toys,’ etc.” Such comments reveal consumers’ reluctance to recognize that their own lives are saturated with oil, or that oil work is essential to petromodernity and the petrostate. As Christensen writes, *somebody* has to do it. The relatively high pay and access to “toys” like a “jacked up truck,” which entice workers to do dangerous and difficult work, can be used at any moment to blame workers, or to undermine any argument that they are exploited or even that they belong among the working class at all. Moore makes a case for more compassionate responses to the suffering of unemployed and underemployed workers: “This is hopefully the lowest point in the recession, but what if it’s not? When are we going to show some compassion for our brothers and sisters? We are all just working for the man, aren’t we? We aren’t seeking your sympathy, we don’t want any remorse. Just have some damn respect while we pinch our pennies until things pick up again.” Moore calls for solidarity with—if not sympathy for—oil workers in a moment of recession. She takes a disidentificatory position in relation to oil work, claiming that oil workers are “working for the man,” just like everyone else—just paying the bills and providing for their families, rather than belonging to an “oil family.” Her rejection of remorse and sympathy, and her faith that things will “pick up again” are rooted in a belief that petromodernity is sustainable and that the oil and gas industry will recover, in keeping with the
way the oil industry continues to hedge its bets on carbon reserves and to predict increases in oil production (see *Global Vision* 3). Yet, Moore’s statement resonates and contrasts with youth climate activist Greta Thunberg’s 2019 statement at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Reversing the denial of fear that I note in Moore’s statement, in my encounter with the oil worker in Fort McMurray, and in Peter Christensen’s and Mathew Henderson’s poetry (see pages 104, 146), Thunberg rejects optimism and uses fear to shame world leaders and adults in general. She calls for remorse, and also for collective action: “I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house was on fire, because it is.” I believe that Moore’s and Thunberg’s calls for solidarity and action go together, in our moment of recession and climate crisis, and it is time to start thinking differently and creatively about what solidarity looks like, including the possibility that it may involve a range of affects including sympathy, remorse, fear, anger, and love.

In recent energy humanities and environmental activist thinking, solidarity involves being clear about who “the man” is and who “we” are. In a recent blog post for 350.org, Albertan journeyman machinist Stephen Buhler refutes the ways in which oil workers have been pitted against environmentalists and migrants, and interpellated “to go to bat for the industry”:

> For years, working people have been told to ignore warnings of an oncoming climate crisis. We’ve been told that these claims are drummed up by people whose interests are against ours. We are told to oppose climate activists who have come to take away our jobs and to hate the people seeking refuge from the rising seas, extreme heat, dying crops and harder lives that our high carbon economy has brought to bear.

> This isn’t true. The “clampdown” is not coming from the environmental movement, or from people seeking refuge from the effects of climate change. It’s coming from the top-down, where the wealthiest 1% control a rigged system that benefits them, and leaves the rest of us fighting over the scraps.

> All across Alberta, especially in the oil and gas sector, our jobs are being automated out of existence. The gap between the rich and the rest of us is growing while regressive style governments—like the incoming UCP [United Conservative Party in
Alberta—are cutting public services, demolishing public ownership and giving handouts to wealthy corporations.

As Buhler demonstrates, the class politics of global warming is becoming increasingly obvious, and it is not what we have been led to expect. In *Fossil Capital*, a history of the triumph of coal-fuelled steam power over water power in nineteenth-century Britain, Andreas Malm argues that steam won because fossil fuels are compatible with the competitive, individualistic, profit-driven motivations of factory-owning capitalists. He demonstrates that fossil power has always been a materialization of class power, exerted by the bourgeoisie (the owners of the means of production) over the working class, and that CO$_2$ is “an effluent of power, of our defeats and their victories” (392). This dynamic is still at work today, when Malm can observe that seven of the top ten Fortune 500 companies in 2013 were fossil fuel extractors (360). Malm argues that class power and politics will be factors in the energy transition that we are now contemplating and planning—or in its delay and deferment.

Huber’s recent work is focused on articulating a class politics to address climate change. He runs a website, *Unequal Carbon Footprints*, where visitors can use an online calculator to determine their personal carbon footprint (or use the average U.S. carbon footprint), then compare it to the footprints of an electric power plant, a refinery, a steel plant, a cement plant, and a fertilizer plant. The site generates results like “You would need to multiply your individual household carbon footprint by 300,770 times to equal one typical high emission refinery” (*Unequal*). Such figures can help us be clear about who we are fighting when we fight for the climate. In his essay “Five Principles of a Socialist Climate Politics,” Huber argues that “Climate change is a class problem.” He proposes an analysis in terms of who owns the means of production. “Here the responsibility for climate change comes into clearer view: those who control profit-oriented production of all the goods and services used in modern life. First and
foremost, this implicates the class of capitalists who dig up fossil fuel and sell it for profit.” He concludes that “a socialist climate politics would place the bulk of responsibility on those profiting from production—not simply people fulfilling their needs in an alienating world of consumerism.” In Huber’s framework, the working class is made up not only of extraction or factory workers but, more broadly, “those who must work to survive.” Based on this expanded class politics, Huber can propose strategies of “planetary solidarity” and of taxing the rich in order to fund a green energy transition that includes education, health care, and new green jobs. It also leads him, like Buhler, to support the proposed Green New Deal, a proposal for drastic economic reform of the scale of the first New Deal in the United States.

In This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate, Naomi Klein considers the way the climate movement grew up alongside the neoliberal economy. The harmful effects of greenhouse gases became popular knowledge, demanding immediate action and regulation, at the same time as the neoliberal revolution led by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. While the news about global warming demanded government regulation and protection, neoliberal economics entrusted matters of the common good to the free market and trickle-down economics. Klein observes that neoliberal ideology actively impedes social movements and corporate accountability, producing a culture of “lopsided sacrifice, in which individuals are asked to pay higher prices for supposedly green choices while large corporations dodge regulation and not only refuse to change their behavior, but charge ahead with ever more polluting activities” (117). Under the hegemony of neoliberalism, environmentally concerned citizens are meant to express their concern by making greener consumer choices, rather than by demanding large-scale and systemic change. Like the contradictory and antagonistic trails of “modernity and wilderness” (Jon Gordon 56) that S.C. Ells tries and fails to reconcile in
*Northland Trails*, however, neoliberalism and environmentalism are irreconcilable. The idea that they can be compatible is a co-optation of environmentalism that has failed to prevent the ongoing crises of climate change, global finance, and migration. In fact, as Klein argues,

> our economic system and our planetary system are now at war. Or, more accurately, our economy is at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life. What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity’s use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion. Only one of these sets of rules can be changed, and it’s not the laws of nature. (21)

Klein concludes, “only mass social movements can save us now” (450). She calls for solidarity with Indigenous rights movements, a moratorium on new oil sands development, and training in renewable energy jobs for oil workers. Since publishing *This Changes Everything*, Klein has collaborated on detailed proposals for green energy transition including The Leap Manifesto and a Green New Deal for Canada.

Matt Hern and Am Johal largely agree with Klein, but they are still concerned about what the war Klein describes means for workers and Indigenous communities. In *Global Warming and the Sweetness of Life*, they write, “If an ecological future requires a battle, let’s be sure who we are fighting” (49). Hern and Johal (with Joe Sacco) use the stories of their road trips to Fort McMurray, Fort Chipewyan, and Lubicon territory to sketch out a post-Marxist, worker-friendly, decolonial land politics. They propose that thinking and working intersectionally is the only way to adequately address global warming. They argue, “[a]n ecological politics, the politics required to answer global warming, must acknowledge that the domination of other-than-humans and the land is made permissible by the domination of humans by humans” (94). They hold together a proposal for no new tar sands expansion and to “take Fort Mac and its claims seriously” (46). They propose that “the sweetness of life” (a decolonial concept rooted in Indigenous terms for “the good life, good living, or right living” [131]) is for everyone. “A sweetness of life has to
present itself as a living alternative to those who are being buffeted by incredible anxiety, volatility, and debt” (172)—it must offer oil workers good things, not only precarity and fear.

A movement of tar sands workers called Iron and Earth has come up with a *Workers’ Climate Plan* that asks the federal government to promote renewable energy and support training in renewables for oil sands workers. They write,

Many oil sands workers are concerned about the environmental impact of fossil fuel development—but they’re also concerned about losing jobs in this precarious industry. We face a difficult situation, and we don’t want to be yet another example of a Canadian workforce that failed to proactively adapt to a changing world.

This challenge inspired us, a group of oil sands workers, to establish Iron & Earth. We want our voices heard in this debate. We want good-paying jobs that will allow us to care for our families. But we also want to feel pride in the work we do, and to know that our daily actions are not contributing to a climate crisis that could dramatically alter the world our children inherit.

From a position of respectful disidentification and contrary infatuation, Iron and Earth presents workers as appreciative of their work and income in the industry but concerned about the environment. Their statement is a proposal, from oil workers, for breaking up with fossil fuels. It is an expression of desire for a good life for workers and for future generations, and an assertion that this disidentificatory position is appropriate for oil workers, and for all of us, as we contemplate transition, beginning from our compromised positions.

I agree with Buhler, Malm, Huber, Klein, and Hern and Johal that the disentanglement of capital and fossil fuels will involve decolonization, a new class politics to unseat the hegemony of Big Oil, and an overhaul of the global economy. In keeping with Canada’s Paris Agreement targets and the more aggressive CO₂ emissions reductions needed to mitigate the worst effects of climate change, fossil fuel extraction has to decline and end, very soon. My wish for the end of the oil industry and of oil work itself is not a wish, however, for harm to come to oil workers. As the poetry I read in this dissertation demonstrates, workers are already thinking about the
implications of climate change, recession, decolonization, and energy transition for their futures, and the climate justice movement must engage with, support, and become allies of workers and of proposals such as the *Workers’ Climate Plan*. Neoliberal worries over of the complicity, guilt, or dependency of individual petrocitizens function to distract and prevent us from collaborating across our differences to demand a large-scale, timely energy transition and to hold accountable oil companies, oil executives, and governments. In order to break up with oil and revamp our land politics and poetics, we need both large-scale social movements (in solidarity, especially, with oil workers and Indigenous peoples) and governments ready to legislate and lead a decolonial, worker-friendly energy transition.

My study of Canadian petropoetics emphasizes the processes, histories, and world-making projects that have made Canadians “a people of prehistoric carbon” (Bob Johnson, *Carbon* xviii), co-constituted and entangled with fossil fuels. It serves to critique petrofictions that prevent us from being clear about who we are fighting, including ideas like these ones:

- that the land and natural resources are “cheap nature” (Patel and Moore 24), available for appropriation and extraction, rather than territory that demands reciprocal and respectful relationship and that rightfully belongs to the Indigenous peoples who were here first;
- that solidarity with oil workers is expressed through climate change denial and oil industry boosterism;
- that the oil and gas industry takes care of workers and Canadians, or that their well-being is inextricably tied to our own;
- that our complicity in petromodernity is a valid reason why we should not demand change;
and that, although it is clear that “the path we have taken has rotted” (Tagaq), there is no leaving or doubling back on the road “less traveled” of petromodernity (Frost).

My readings of poetry written by oil workers in Canada emphasize that oil workers understand the ecological costs of oil and gas extraction, and that they think about climate change, energy transition, and the futures of their families, the oil patch, and the land. They see the negative impact of the land poetics and politics that oil work enacts, they understand that Indigenous poetics is a more appropriate way to relate to the land, and they wish and hope for a transformation of land poetics in the oil patch and in Canada. The oil worker poets I study use disidentification with their work and their prescribed role in petromodernity to critique the industry while still working inside it, and to express fear and concern for the land, themselves, and the future. They also prefigure solidarities for the era of climate change, the Anthropocene, and energy transition that are grounded in complicity, compromise, and feelings of contrary infatuation rather than a “purity politics” that requires absolute innocence or guilt (Shotwell 7).

I conclude this dissertation with hope and commitment to the kinds of solidarity provoked and imagined by the oil worker poets I study. I look forward to continuing to study both oil worker poetry and petropoetics more broadly. Together, the concept and the practice of petropoetics offer innovative ways of thinking and engaging in energy humanities scholarship and the world-making project of energy transition.
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